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by FRANK BONHAM

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ALL STORIES COMPLETE

JULY ISSUE PUBLISHED JUNE 3!

VOLUME 55 JUNE, 1949 NUMBER 2

Western Novel With a Punch

Dusty Wheels—Bloody Trail!.....Frank Bonham **10**
Why did Jess Clyman risk fortune, life and honor to become a Mexican stagecoach king—and a gringo without a country?

Short Frontier Novel

Last of the Fighting Sugrues.....Roe Richmond **48**
The owlhoot boss was crazy fast with Colts, but so were his ex-pardners—for whose honest law stars he bid fifty thousand Judas dollars!

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Boss of the Boothill Herd.....Thomas Thompson **78**
Kent Tyson had no friends, and wanted none. But he had pet hates, and one of them—the damning dream of three hanged men—was getting too big to ignore. . . .

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The kid knew he had more courage than all his sneering kinsmen—with everything but guns!

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Trooper Conlin figured a man could use some help in that bloody desert land—even a hand from the Devil!

—And—

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Recommended top-notch current Western movies.

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Pat Carney was another fighting man who helped build America with blood and guts.

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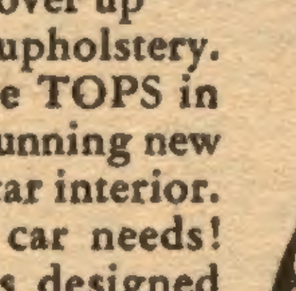

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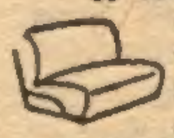

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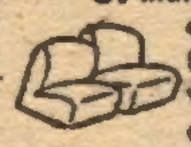

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IN THE SADDLE

IF YOU hit the saddle and trek far beyond the Mississippi you'll find that mossyhorns still paw and beller about the "big die-up" of the winter of 1886-1887 when terrible blizzards, winds and freezing temperatures slaughtered countless cattle on Western ranges. But the winter of 1948-49 has caused the cracker box hangers-on to almost swaller their chaws. Both affairs were whingdings and the old-timers can't seem to get together on which was worst. The recent catastrophe being still fresh in most minds, we'll leave a description of the '86-'87 big wind to one well-known Western writin' gent, a man who has spent years on what used to be the Old Frontier.

Take it away—Del Rayburn!

This winter on the Western ranges has some parallels with "the hard winter" of '86-'87, in more ways than just bad weather. Take Montana, for example. The fall of '86 found at least 775,000 head of cattle on Montana ranges; natives, Texas "dogies," or California and Oregon "pilgrims," all told. That summer had turned off dry. It had been a general condition. Before fall the grass had been eaten off short because of over-stocking. Some owners, my grandfather for one, had seen what was coming and unloaded all but what the grass would carry in good shape, dry or not. By fall such unseasonal marketing had knocked the market in the head. So the gamblers, speculators, and just plain ordinary stockmen who had failed to get a premonition of what might happen, decided to hold most of their steers over through the winter.

Winter began about like it did this year, in early November. After the first heavy snow and blizzard whipping wind, it warmed up for a few days. Then it turned cold for sure. A crust of ice on the old snow made it almost impossible for stock to dig down through to what short graze they might find underneath. And fresh snow kept coming.

About the middle of December another real blizzard swept from Canada to Mexico. And even after it let up a little it still kept storming off and on. A new year came and it seemed determined not to let the old year outdo it. Early in January the worst storm yet swept the cow-country, piling up heavy snow, then sinking the temperature to as low as forty-five

(Please turn to page 96)

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POPULAR FILMS

Good Movie-Going For Fiction Fans

Palmer Picks:

For A Western: "The Red Pony" with Myrna Loy, Robert Mitchum, Louis Calhern, Sheppard Strudwick, Peter Miles (Republic). Technicolor.

Not in a sense a true Western, but a picture laid against a ranch and a boy's dream about a pony come true, which even the most calloused Western picture-goer will find moving. Unlike most horse pictures, people remain the central characters in this John Steinbeck story. As the story unfolds you see the boy (Peter Miles) growing apart from his father (Sheppard Strudwick) through his love for his pony and the hero-worship of a ranch hand (Robert Mitchum) who helps him raise the animal. Myrna Loy, as the mother, understands the boy and the byplay with her husband about their child is adult. It all resolves itself when the pony dies and the boy takes a closer step to manhood. He is rewarded in the end by a new-born colt and a new sense of the way things are in the world.

A simple story, well-told and rich in human values and colorful backgrounds.

• • •

For Adventure: "Canadian Pacific" with Randolph Scott and Jane Wyatt. (20th Century-Fox). Cinecolor.

Building this famous Canadian railroad was more than just ties and trestles—at least according to this version where it takes sixguns and two-fisted action by Tom Andrews (Randolph Scott) to overcome bad whites.

Although Andrews has a temporary love affair with a female doctor (Jane Wyatt) in the railroad camp, it is his own true love, a French-Indian girl, who warns him of the Indians' plan to attack the camp. Andrews goes on a private sortie to prevent the signal for the attack from being given and gets the ringleaders—but too late. Returning to camp he joins the fight which the Indians abandon after they hear the whistle from a relief train.

The railroad background gives a different flavor to this outdoor action picture. Plenty of bang-bang and dust-biting keep it fast paced.

• • •

For Murder Drama: "Too Late for Tears" with Lizabeth Scott, Dan Duryea and Don de Fore (United Artists).

Mysteriously, Jane Palmer (Lizabeth Scott) and her husband acquire a leather bag containing a fortune in cash. Although she is determined to keep it, her husband thinks differently and checks it at Union Station. With the help of a blackmailing crook (Dan Duryea), Jane drowns her husband, but they fail to find the claim check for the money. The husband's sister and a stranger (Don de Fore), who arrive on the scene, locate the check. Jane takes it at gun's point, sheds herself of the blackmailer with a well-administered dose of poison and flees to Mexico. The sister and stranger follow her, unravel the plot and bring Jane to a just end.

Suspensefully played, the picture makes for some spine-tingling moments.

• • •

For Sports: "Take Me Out To The Ball Game" with Frank Sinatra, Esther Williams, Gene Kelly (MGM). Technicolor.

Imagine Frank Sinatra and Gene Kelly, as entertainers turned baseball players, fielding "hot ones" for a baseball team owned by Esther Williams. Silly, but nonetheless fun. When a gambler (Edward Arnold), who is betting against the team, inveigles Kelly to direct the chorus at a night club, Kelly begins to slip from the loss of sleep and is benched. Eventually, wised up by a little gal who is sweet on Sinatra, he gets back in the line-up. The gambler tries to stop him but a well-aimed pop bottle by Esther Williams saves the day and the pennant.

The picture—and the baseball—are played for the laughs.

by Ted Palmer

"I WAS ASHAMED OF MY FACE

until Viderm helped make my skin clearer in one short week"

(FROM A LETTER BY E. S. JORDAN, DETROIT, MICH.)

If your face is broken-out, if bad skin is making you miserable, here is how to stop worrying about pimples, blackheads and other externally-caused skin troubles.

JUST FOLLOW SKIN DOCTOR'S SIMPLE DIRECTIONS

IT DOESN'T PAY to put up with a broken-out face. Your very success in business, love and social life may depend upon your looks. Nobody likes to look at a face that is blemished by blackheads or pimples. WOMEN ARE ATTRACTED TO MEN WHO HAVE SMOOTH, CLEAR, HEALTHY-LOOKING SKIN. Business executives don't choose men whose complexions are against them. And it's just plain foolish to take chances with your happiness and success in life when the Viderm formula can do so much to give you the clearer, blemish-free face you want.

Good-looking Skin Is Not for Women Only

You—*yes, you*—can have the same handsome complexion, free from externally caused skin troubles, simply by giving your face the special care that screen stars give theirs. *Because, remember!—a good-looking, handsome appearance usually begins with the condition of your skin.* There's almost nothing to it—it is just about as easy as washing your face. *The whole secret consists of washing your face in a way that thoroughly purges the pores of every last speck of dirt and grime*—something that ordinary cleansing seldom does. In fact, examination after examination shows that, usually, it is not a case of "bad skin" so much as faulty cleansing that leaves oily grime clogging up your pores. What you should use is a highly concentrated soap like Viderm Skin Cleanser. This penetrates the pores and acts as an antiseptic. Specks of irritating dirt and grime are quickly loosened. They dissolve and disappear, leaving your skin entirely free of the dirt particles that otherwise remain as pimples, blackheads and other externally-caused skin troubles.

DON'T DO THIS!

Don't murder your skin by squeezing it. Skin is delicate. When you break it, you leave yourself open to miseries. It's far easier, far safer, to let the Double Viderm Treatment help you enjoy a handsome, clearer, blemish-free complexion.

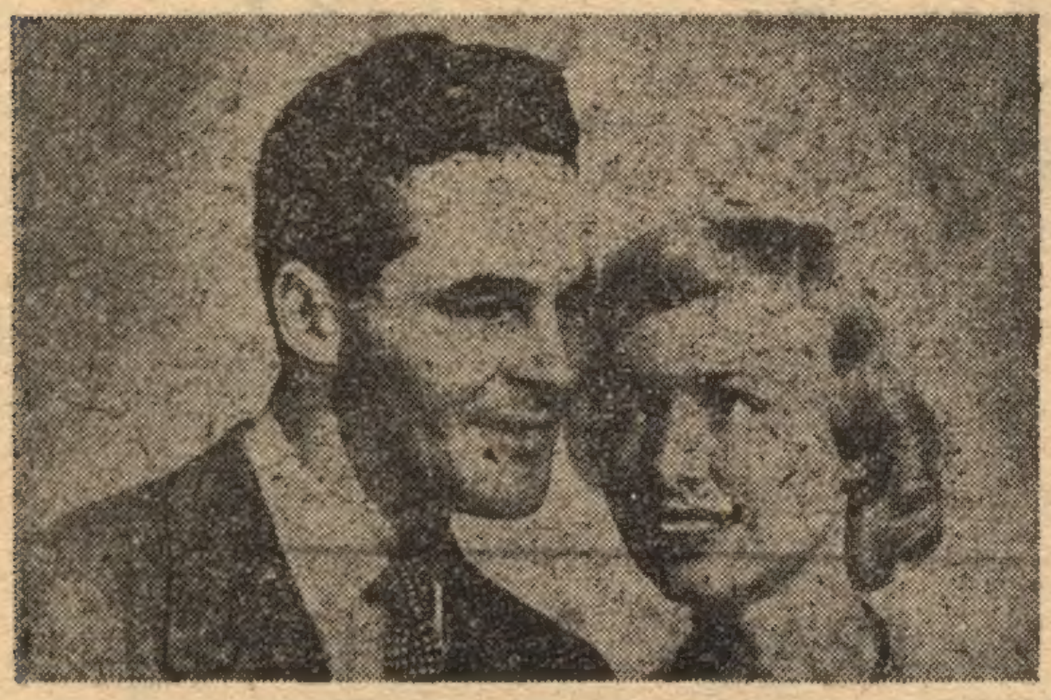
Squeezing pimples or blackheads to get rid of them is a nasty, messy business—but that isn't the worst of it. Doing so may also be injurious and leave your face with unsightly, embarrassing blemishes. There is, now, a much easier, safer, cleaner way to help you rid your face of ugly, offensive, externally-caused skin troubles. *You merely follow a doctor's simple directions.*

Don't murder your skin! Here's all you have to do to get it smoother and clearer and to keep it that way. Use Viderm Skin Cleanser when you wash your face. Rub the rich lather of this highly-concentrated medicated soap on your face for just a few seconds and then rinse it off. Then apply a little Viderm Medicated Skin Cream and that's all there is to it. Viderm Medicated Skin Cream quickly disappears, leaving your skin nice and smooth. This simple treatment, used after shaving, helps heal tiny nicks and cuts, relieves razor-burn and smarting, besides conditioning your skin.

Give Your Face This Treat for 7 Days

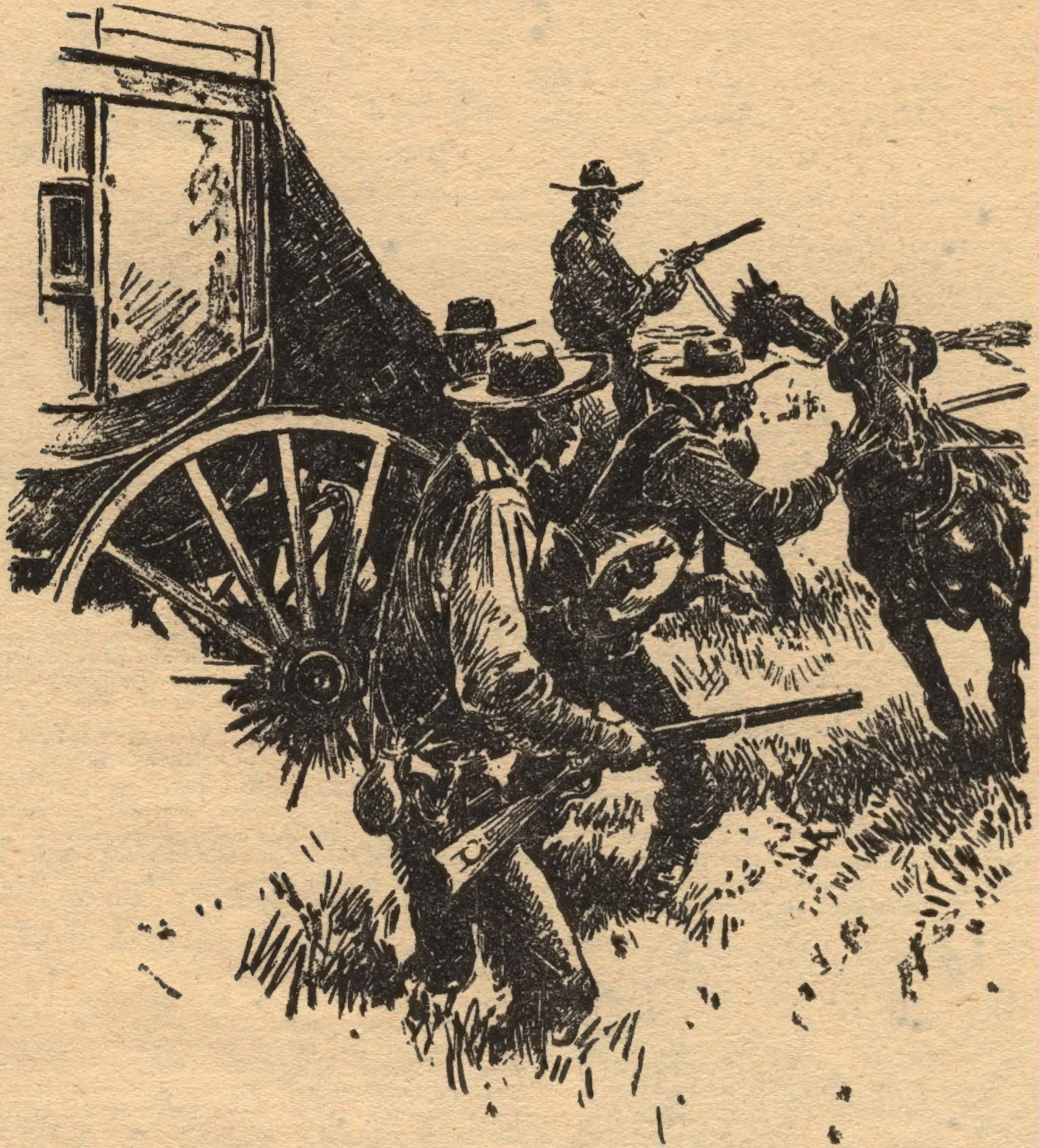
Stop worrying and being embarrassed over what may happen to your skin. Just send for your Viderm Double Treatment this minute, and be confident of a smoother and clearer complexion. Follow the simple directions, written by a doctor, that you will get with your Viderm Double Treatment. Then look in your mirror and listen to your friends admire your smoother, clearer skin—the kind that women go for.

Just mail your name and address to The New York Skin Laboratory, 206 Division Street, Dept. G-1, New York City 2, N. Y. By return mail you will receive both of the Viderm formulas, complete with full directions, and mailed in a plain wrapper. On delivery, pay two dollars plus postage. If you wish, you can save the postage fee by mailing the two dollars with your letter. Then, if you aren't thrilled with results, your money will be cheerfully refunded. Remember that both of the formulas you use have been fully tested and proven, and are reliable for you. *If they don't help you, your treatments cost you nothing.* After you have received your Viderm, if you have any questions to ask concerning abused skin, just send them in.



DUSTY WHEELS—

Jess Clyman was king in El Paso, but if he had guts enough to betray both North and South alike, he'd be lord of the damndest stage line that ever ran the bullet-blockade across the Brimstone Border!



Dramatic Frontier Novel By FRANK BONHAM

BLOODY TRAIL!

CHAPTER ONE

Fightin' Filibusterer

MEN who play a waiting game need an accurate sense of timing. Clyman had this. They require boldness, and he had this. Originality is not out of place, nor capital, if they hope to sweat out the other fellow's game, and

Ben Dallas was bringing the Concord in at a full run

these things, too, were his. Jess Clyman, twenty-eight, unmarried, quiet but vigorous, knew he'd need all these attributes if he were to bull his way through this grandiose scheme of his, and he had decided, with a young man's vanity, that there was nothing he lacked.

For two weeks he had lain around El Paso, spending most of his time in a fuming little gambling and drinking place called El Sueco. He sat at a front window, with a view of the wind-harried plaza and the stage station across the way, watching the packing-in of a transcontinental log-jam of stagecoaches, wagons, travelers and horses. Hotels bulged with frightened men and women. Saloons thundered with talk of war. Travelers journeying east were dumped here because the stages would go no farther for fear of running into bands of raiding Southerners or Black Republicans. Travelers following the western star were left high and dry because the Apaches had hacked to pieces most of the line between El Paso and Tucson.

El Paso was a cageful of terrified human animals who did eccentric things, who killed one another nightly out of sheer terror, with cards or women as an excuse. Jess Clyman felt himself aloof from the mood of panic. He had the indolent polish of self-sufficiency. He had a bag of gold, and when the time looked ripe he'd walk across the plaza to the depot of the Great Southern Overland Mail and make his proposition to the division superintendent.

He was a dark-skinned, blond young fellow with blue eyes which looked pale in his dark face. He had been born in Missouri but raised in the Mother Lode of California. Given to figuring, it had not taken him long to notice that the men who had the gold were not the ones who dug and panned for it: They were the men who served them. When he was old enough, which was seventeen, he bought a span of mules and a wagon and began freighting on a small scale. By the time he was twenty-seven, he had run it up to twenty-five thousand dollars worth of animals and rolling stock. Then he got the urge to travel, and he put his money into gold and started east. He was one of the men who had been jettisoned at the El Paso depot. In three days he knew what he wanted to do.

He was at the depot the day the girl arrived from the east. She looked as frightened as any of them but was determined not to show it. Clyman saw her bags placed before her with an air of finality. She was small and neat and wore a gray poplin gown trimmed with blue ribbon, and a little feathered jockey cap on the side of her head. She kept waiting for someone to pick up her bags and escort her to a hotel, her chin going higher each minute.

Clyman was there to appraise horses. But he took pity on her and presented himself with his hat under his arm. "Jess Clyman, miss. Nevada City. I can get you a hotel room if you'd like. It'll be no trouble."

She brought her eyes coolly upon him. They were the gray of a smoke-tree, purplish and fine, and he knew at once that she was a member of the only class on earth he was in awe of—the lady. Highborn men or lowborn he could handle, but women of the upper class he did not quite know how to take.

"Thank you," she said. "There'll be someone to help me in a moment."

He set the bags down, sufficiently disciplined by her gaze, which came up from below him but managed to look down upon him. "Sure," he said. "Somebody will be bound to, if you wait long enough."

He went back to the saloon, not quite angry. Women, he guessed, had to be careful when they traveled, but that young lady was going to wish she had accepted his offer before night fell. There wasn't a hotel room left in El Paso.

THE SECOND time he saw the girl was two hours later, just before dusk, a cold, sweeping wind hurling grit at her as she came along the sidewalk. He was back in El Sueco, sitting with two Mexican girls. He had never drunk with more than one girl at a time before and he felt like a roué. But they had fastened themselves upon him in the hope, at the most, of acquiring a well-heeled friend; at the least, of acquiring a few drinks.

The girl stopped when she saw him through the dirty window panes. She was staggering along carrying her own

bags. Chivalry was as foreign to the town as cold beer. Then she saw the girls with him and a look of confusion came to her eyes and she turned and hurried on. Jess left some money on the table and followed her.

He caught her fifty feet away, where she had set the bags down to rest. Once more he approached with his hat under his arm. "Still Jess Clyman, miss," he said. "Still from Nevada City. And I can still get you a room."

She wanted to accept in utmost gratitude, he knew. But she was afraid of him and couldn't forget things she had heard about men who drank with saloon girls. "Really," she said, "there must—I haven't tried them all, yet. There's one called—"

Clyman put on his hat and raised the bags. "That one's full too," he smiled. "The girls in there were after me. I wasn't after them. That's the way it is in this town. If you want this room—"

She raised her chin again. It was simply in her; she couldn't help it. "What makes you so sure you can find me a room? They told me at the depot there wasn't a room anywhere."

"I was going to give you my room. I'll catch a shakedown at the depot."

"Oh!" Her mouth was small and round and she looked as though she felt rather small herself. "Mr. Clyman, you're very patient and very generous, and . . . . and I'm very sorry. But I can't let you do it."

He caught one bag under his arm, held the second by the grip, and had his other hand free to escort her along the teeming walk. "I don't know what else you can do, unless you want to share a stall with a stage horse. It isn't much of a hotel but it's the best in this place."

By the time they reached it he knew a few things about her. Her name was Susan Shelby. She was from Alabama, and sounded it. Her father was American consul-general in Mexico City. She was on the way to join him. She wanted to know what chance there was of their ever going on; she was trying to reach San Diego to take a boat.

"Not much," he said. "But we'll work something out."

"I hope so. The war *can't* last long, but if it should. . . ." She stopped abruptly.

He saw her settled and was granted permission to come back at seven to take her somewhere to eat where she wouldn't be poisoned by the food . . . .

Two more stages came clattering in, one from the east, one from the west. That brought the total to thirteen packed into the big stage yard. There were some hundred or more horses and mules in the corrals and mighty little hay for them. Clyman saw the division superintendent stomping back and forth between stables and station, a man crucified by his problems. The drivers sat around looking less important than usual. Going were the days when they could command four or five hundred dollars a month to drive a stage fifty miles a day.

The time was ripe. The waiting game was over.

DIVISION Superintendent Niscannon was barricaded behind his desk when Clyman entered. He came in unannounced and unwelcome. Niscannon was a bearish, sour-eyed man with putty-textured skin rutted with harsh lines. For two weeks nobody had brought him a word of good news. If anyone wanted to see him, it was about finding a room or borrowing ten dollars or demanding that the stages get moving. He made a growl around his cigar as the younger man came in.

"You can sleep in the barn, if you want, but as for borrowing any money—"

"It's a hell of a situation, isn't it?" Clyman sat on a rawhide-latticed chair, crossed his legs and hung his hat on one boot-toe.

Niscannon went back to mourning over way-bills and express vouchers. Jess Clyman was silent. The superintendent pivoted on the chair suddenly and exploded: "Look! If you want to jaw, there's a dozen drivers sitting outside that door drawing pay for doing just that. But I've got worries. I've got more worries than any man in Texas. If there's anything I don't want to look at, it's a man without worries."

"Everybody's got worries. I was going to Houston, but I got sidetracked and stuck in this place. Isn't that a worry?"

Niscannon closed his eyes on the old, old story and went back to his papers.

"—And on top of that, I've got a peck-basket full of gold. And that worries me."

Niscannon's bloodshot gaze came up. "Find yourself a girl. You won't have it to worry over long."

Jess shook his head. "I'm going to invest it. Don't this seem like the damndest time to be buying stagecoaches?"

At last the stage man perceived that his visitor was deviously backing into a horse-trade. The vising of his jaws ceased. "It sure does. What do you want with stagecoaches?"

"I'm speculating. I speculate that if I take a string of Concords into Mexico, I can sell them high. They're practically legal tender in the capital. Naturally I'd have to get them cheap."

"Naturally." Niscannon leaned back and rolled a cigar between his hands. "Why tell me about it?"

"You've got thirteen stages in the yard, a hundred stage animals and nothing to feed them. One of these days a couple of dozen Union or Confederate troopers are going to slope in, throw a handful of scrip at you and take them away. How's that going to make you look with the company? If there still is one."

"How does it make every agent and section boss on the Oxbow look, the way they're throwing up their hands and dumping everything in my lap?"

Jess Clyman shrugged, rising. "Well, it was just an idea. But I thought if you could sell those coaches and some of the wagons and stock, they might figure they had a good man out here. Maybe you'd be one of the ones they moved north with the line."

Niscannon bounced up as he put on his hat. "Sit down! Sit down! Clyman—by God, if you're joshing me—" But he quickly convinced himself Clyman was serious by peering into his face, and he pulled his chair around so that their knees were almost touching, and said, "All right. Let's talk turkey."

* * *

When he left the office Clyman walked the lighter for ninety-five hundred dollars in gold removed from his money belt. He did not know whether the stage man planned to abscond with it or turn it in to the company: It did not concern him. He had bills-of-sale on the coaches, ten wagons and seventy-five horses and mules. He had been given the name of Hugh Donovan, Fourth Division section boss, who would shake up a crew of drivers and hostlers.

Jess moved fast. He was anxious to scour the dust of El Paso in the Big River. The coaches were his worry now.

Hugh Donovan was another of El Sueco's partisans. Jess found him, by description, shooting pool with a sallow, spectacularly thin man. He watched Donovan sink the five ball, try for another, and presently pick up a glass of beer from the edge of the table. He drained half the beer. He belched. He was a very large man in a tawny buckskin shirt, dark pants and high, wrinkled boots. A sombrero with two matches under the hatband hung between his shoulders by a thong. His hair was crisp and short, blond going gray, and his eyes were deep and blue, set wide under the hard bone-ridge of his brow. He was about forty-five.

What Clyman liked about him was that he could play a decent game of pool in a time of general catastrophe. He made himself known to Donovan and the big man sank a couple more and then came over to stand by Jess while the other man shot. "You say Niscannon sent you?"

"He thought you could help me find twenty-five men overnight. Thirteen stage drivers and a dozen others. Two of them ought to be good shots with a rifle, for meat getters."

Jess saw him looking him over in the mirror behind the bar. "What do you want with thirteen drivers?"

"You guess. I want them by tomorrow noon. I'm not trying to fool anybody about where we're going. It'll be Mexico City, if we're lucky, and I'll pay two hundred a month to the drivers, a hundred to the rest. They can take five hundred pounds of freight apiece to sell in the capital. Guns, tools—anything like that. They'll all make a killing."

The lean, hollow-chested man playing pool with Donovan looked around. "Did somebody say Mexico City?" He stood leaning on his cue.

DONOVAN frowned. "Don't publish it, Doc. Clyman, this is Doc Bible. Maybe you'd like a sawbones along. Doc

would give his right eye, the good one, to get out of this rat-trap."

The doctor had a long, pinched countenance with a frazzled light-brown imperial on his chin. His left eye had a peculiar yellowish-green cast and the pupil was too large: Jess suddenly realized it was a makeshift, probably a lynx-eye from a taxidermist shop. It caused him to smile as he shook Bible's hand, and Bible winked the other eye and said, "It's got all kinds of advantages. I'll hate to give it up if I ever get back to civilization. I can see in the dark with that one, you know. So you're going to Mexico—!" He said it with the greatest relish and curiosity.

Donovan glanced about them. "Clyman, if you want to get out of town, I'd walk soft and move damn quick. Let's go outside."

They left the saloon and walked in the plaza. A series of dingy alleys converged on the treeless square, where an endless procession of women and girls with *ollas*, or wooden buckets, balanced on their shoulders trudged to the stone well in the center of it. Bull teams jostled, horsemen spurred through the crowds of men and animals. Everyone seemed in a rush to go somewhere, though there was nowhere to go.

Doc Bible kept peering at Clyman. "I'd pay double fare to get out of here, Clyman, even to Mexico. I could get a boat from Topolobampo to 'Frisco. What are you charging?"

"It isn't a common carrier proposition; every passenger will make a hand. But you can go as company surgeon, and no charge."

The doctor grasped his hand. "I'll set you a broken leg or cure you a bellyache right now. Say the word."

Donovan's competent gaze was on the jam of dusty crimson coaches in the stage yard. "Twenty-five men. I'll make a deal with you: Twenty-four—and myself." He grinned.

"Can you drive a stage?"

"No, but I can shoot an antelope as far as I can see one. If Niscannon's sold out, I've got no job to hold me. I'll pick up a load of junk jewelry and take over them brown-eyed women the way Cortez took Mexico."

Jess measured the section boss for an instant. The man's strengths were obvious enough—aggressiveness, confidence, leadership—but it was his weaknesses Clyman was interested in. These might be vanity and singleness of purpose that lapped over into stubbornness. "These men are all used to taking orders from you," he said. "Make it plain that they'll be taking orders from me on this trip."

Donovan looked at him steadily, his brown face flat. Then, grinning quickly, he struck him on the shoulder. "I'll have them call you Commodore if you say so."

WITH THIS done, the gun primed and ready to be fired, Jess thought again of Susan Shelby. He had only a faint notion that she'd be interested in a trip south. He wouldn't blame her. A delicately-reared young woman, if she had any imagination, would faint at the thought of the hazards and inconveniences of such a trip. But he meant to ask her.

He put in the afternoon buying supplies and seeing them packed. Flour, salt, powder and ball, hardware. Everything you could not pick or shoot on the trail. He inspected the stagecoaches for cut spindles and sprung thoroughbraces. He met the drivers and got their hands individually that they would stay with the train as far as Mexico City. He set departure for ten o'clock the next morning.

At seven that evening he went down the hallway of the hotel through a faint blue of whale-oil smoke and the conglomerate body-smell of too many people living too close together. He knocked at the door of Susan Shelby's room and waited. He waited fifteen minutes in the hall. Then he went to the noisy central room and listened to the racket of war talk and assorted complaints for another fifteen. At length she appeared.

She was unbelievably trim; she was contrite and vivacious at one time. She wore the same gray gown with its touches of blue, but she had managed to get every travel-wrinkle out of it, and the dark-brown sausage ringlets at the back of her head were neat and shining as metal-turnings. She looked to Jess like something that ought to be under a glass bell to keep off the dust. She could have been two hours late and carried it off as well.

"I had so many things to do," she told him, "and then I slept . . . . and then you knocked at the door. You don't know how fast I dressed."

Jess guided her through the raucous traffic of the sidewalk. She seemed to flinch from hurrying Mexicans. He led her past the stage depot where, for the first night in two weeks, the superintendent's office was dark. Niscannon would sleep for a week. Jess had had the coaches aligned, ready for teaming, and they bulked, freshly washed, in a gleaming dark line within the gate. He held the girl there a moment.

"How do they look to you?"

She shuddered. "I know how a pullet feels in a gunny sack, after coming all the way from Tipton in one of those things."

"Depends on what you're looking at. I'm looking at thirteen Concord stages, as saleable as ten-cent diamonds. I bought them today."

She turned her eyes up to his face in astonishment. "Jess! What do you want with them?"

"I'm going to sell them again."

"But where? Who else would be foolish enough to buy them?"

They came to the restaurant and he pushed the door open on a dimly-lighted scene of limber-legged tables and smoking lamps. At a tile stove in the rear a fat Mexican woman was dipping tortillas in grease, sprinkling ground cheese and onions on them and dousing the roll with earth-red chili. The old, familiar smell of Mexican cooking was as heart-arresting to him as the sound of a sweetheart's voice. But he had to urge Susan Shelby into the room with a promise.

"It tastes better than it looks."

He ordered, aware that she wasn't going to like it. On the other hand, the food was safer than spoiled beef in an American cafe. She had a little difficulty getting back to the coaches again. "I still don't see how you expect . . . ."

"I don't. Not here. I'm taking them south."

"But there's nothing south of here but Mexico."

"That's right. Mexico City."

She caught her breath, started to say something, and then frowned and looked down at the table. The food came, two plates smoking with Mexican rice, frijoles, *huevos rancheros*, and *enchiladas*. Susan pushed at the *enchilada* with an iron fork. She took a bite and looked at him in distress. She got it down and her eyes flooded with tears. It was incandescent with chili, which was the beauty of it. Finally she ate the rice and eggs and drank the coffee.

"Mexico City," she mused. "Did you know that was where I was going when I was put off here?"

"You told me. You said your father was American consul."

"Confederate American consul."

She said it with pride, her eyes challenging him. He scowled. Politics did not excite him, and the war still seemed to be none of his business. He sidestepped a discussion of it.

"It isn't much of a road. I've got a map but I think a lot of it's just a cow-track. But what I was thinking, if you really want to get there . . . ."

She sat with her eyes beginning to lighten, waiting for him to say it. Something slowed him down. If this were another third-rate-café he was asking her into, he didn't want to be held responsible. "I make no promises or predictions. But if you want to go along you'll have your own coach and it won't cost you anything."

"It frightens me but it frightens me still worse to think of staying here. Jess, it's fine of you to ask me. I'd like to go."

ALL THE way back to the hotel he felt the lift of being with her. Yet there was a shading of intuition about it when he thought of the weeks ahead. She would have no maid, no pampering; her remembrances of the Oxbow would seem like a dream. Jess Clyman hoped she could take it.

At her door he said, "Ten o'clock. Get all the sleep you can. We'll travel fast the first couple of days."

And then, because she was the prettiest woman he had seen since he left San Francisco, and because she was provoking him with her eyes, he took her shoulders gently in his hands, bent and kissed her on the lips. She repulsed him without moving or speaking. It was like kissing a picture. She regarded him coolly.

"Have I paid my fare, now? Or will there be other installments?" She said that very slowly.

Jess said, "You're paid up. You were before. Good night." He was not so much contrite as angry and he didn't understand why.

Niscannon had said he could spend the night in the stage station, in a back room loaded with crated files and a cot. Doctor Bible was sleeping in one of the coaches, glad to be shut of a louse-ridden hotel room on the river. There was a barracks-like building at the rear of the stage corral where the drivers and hostlers bunked. Jess sat up late, studying his maps. He had the creeping fears of any man going into a dangerous gamble, not quite ready to back out, not eager to push ahead. It was after twelve when he snuffed the lamp and pulled off boots and shirt.

He was sitting on the cot rolling a last cigarette when he saw a light reflected on the wall. He glanced through the window. He saw only the dark corral with its throng of horses; and beyond it the low, pole-beamed facade of the employes' quarters. A wash of light ruddied the tawny adobe wall, reflecting faintly into Jess's room. He could not see the source of it. It was to the left, toward the stage barn. He saw the horses begin to move restlessly and all at once it struck at him.

He tugged on his boots, pulled his carbine from the head of the cot and strode through the dark freight room to the side door. He opened it and stood there a moment. His impulse to action ran down. Looking through it was like stirring up the lees of a nightmare.

Two coaches were already beginning to burn, and the man who had set fire to the second was already climbing a wheel-hub of the third with a coach-lamp in his hand, the brass lens-housing removed and the wick turned up high. A second man, four coaches ahead of him, pulled a lamp from its socket, drew the stopper and dumped the whale oil onto the floor beneath the driver's seat. Then he ducked on to the next in the compact line of coaches.

Jess pushed open the cheesecloth-frame screen door. A rusty spring squawked. Both men turned in alarm. Clyman set the stock of the gun to his shoulder and leaned against the jamb. He took aim on the man leaping from the wheel to the ground. The gunkick jolted him. The roar of the gun hit a dozen adobe walls and came rolling back at him in a cascade of sound. The hatless man with the lamp dropped it and lunged into the yard, reeled aside and fell across the tongue.

Jess saw the other man draw a revolver, balance there with his boot on the hub of a front wheel, clutching the brake with his left hand while he threw down on the doorway. Ducking back, Clyman heard the expanding report of the gun; the door-frame was hit and wrenched from one hinge. He struck it open again and saw the gunman rushing toward the gate. Clyman's gun was a six-shot Dragoon Colt with a shoulder stock and a long barrel. He squinted at the indistinct, running figure through the sights, took his shot and knew at once he had missed.

Then there was another man in the gate. The running figure swerved, came up against the door of the baggage room, half-raising his Colt. Jess heard him say in a gasp, "Hugh!"

Hugh Donovan, a tapered wedge against the faint lustre of the town, stood with one foot a little ahead of the other, his left arm hanging, his right slightly hitched back. A gun flashed. The bullet, crossing only twenty feet of ground, hit the man hard, nailing him to the door. He staggered two steps away and went to his knees. Then he went forward on his face.

CHAPTER TWO

Winds of War

CLYMAN lost the first stage. He saved the second. When they were through fighting the fire he went to the baggage room where Bible was tending the wounded men. The man Donovan had shot was killed instantly. The other was still alive, hanging to a thread of breath that sucked through the ragged wound in his chest. The bullet had driven a splinter of bone into his lung; Bible didn't expect him to live through the night. The man's name was Rice. He'd been one of the wagon drivers Donovan picked. The dead

man's name was Naylor. Donovan stood with Clyman in the yard and swore.

"The dairty sons of Satan! Slave men they were, forever chattering about stage's rights and low tariff and a parcel of other things I don't give a damn for one way or another. But I didn't see where it could matter what color a man's politics were, for this trip. They figgered, you see, there wouldn't be a trip. Maybe they thought you were taking these coaches north."

"Where would they get that notion?"

Donovan tugged at a shaggy blond eyebrow. "I don't know. Being you're a Californian, maybe." He scowled at the throng of drivers and hostlers about the door of the baggage room. "I'll be shakin' a few bushes tonight for any more Johnnie's in this crew. Get your rest, Clyman. I'll sit up with them Concords myself."

But Jess didn't rest the balance of that night. A hex had been put on the trip. He wasn't superstitious but it bothered him to put his foot into a room that had been quarantined.

Nevertheless, he went ahead in the morning with as much confidence as he could display. He checked everything himself, assigned drivers to coaches and inspected the loads of merchandise they were taking. He saw the teams watered and grained and at ten gave the word to hitch. Then he hurried to the hotel. He wanted to get out of town before all the frightened travelers who inhabited it realized a train was going out. Clubs couldn't beat them off if they discovered it.

Susan Shelby called through the door that she'd be right out. Twenty minutes later she appeared. Jess seized the bags and hurried her out without listening to her excuses. She was, he decided, one of those women born with their clocks set back an hour.

Someone had shut the gate of the stage yard. Before it a shouting mob surged. Men with suitcases, women with children, all trying to get through the cottonwood-pole gate to storm the crimson coaches stirring restlessly under four-horse teams. Jess pulled her aside. There was a door into the depot; he rapped until Niscannon opened it. Niscannon was still half-drunk as a result of a celebration the night before. He bowed low to the girl and barred the door after them. He said, "Ye're a fool, Clyman, if you don't accept passengers at two hundred dollars a head."

"I'd be a fool if I did. I may make it if I travel light."

He rushed Susan into the yard. The driver of her coach was already on the box, a big iron-mustached man named Ben Dallas. He was taking along a load of black silk bolt-cloth, which he thought he could sell to women in mourning, which in Mexico included anyone over two. Jess put Susan in and hesitated with his hand on the latch.

"Still sure?"

Her color was that of muslin but she smiled, "Sure, Jess."

Clyman slung up onto the box of the lead coach. The driver sat flicking his whip at pebbles. He was a leathery old-timer named Gil Applegate. He wore a collar-band shirt with no collar, a wadded silk vest much stained with food, and buck-skin pants. He glanced at Jess through the round silver spectacles he wore. "Know this is a crazy idear, don't you?"

"If it's too crazy, you don't have to go along."

Applegate spat tobacco juice on a wheeler's rump. He picked up a copper bugle from under the seat, decorated with a silk tassel and wiped his lips. "As long as we've got Hortencia along, you don't have to worry. Roll 'em?"

Jess signaled the gate men to open it. "Roll 'em."

Applegate blew a sour little flourish which was his trademark. Other drivers sounded their calls, a brassy tangle of discord which somehow threaded a ram-rod down a man's spine. The gate swung in.

There was a wild rush of would-be passengers into the yard. Men grabbed at the harness tugs and pounded on the panels. Applegate kicked off the brake and let the buckskin cracker of his whip singe a man's ear. The coach rolled forward with a grind of iron tires.

Jess heard a woman shriek "Murderers!" He saw a man hold up a chamois bag and shout, "A thousand dollars." He had to discipline himself, to recall that with loaded coaches on a trip like this he could hope for nothing but disaster. He could not feed them, bunk them nor tend

the inevitable sick. He looked straight ahead and the team reared and lunged out onto the plaza. He stood up to look behind. The other stages were in motion, thrusting through the mob. Then they were out of his vision as Applegate hawed the team into the alley beside the station and let it run. There was a crowded vista of adobes boxing in a pot-holed street, then a glimpse of open land and cotton-woods along the river and finally they were on the river road, clattering along toward the ford, with the midnight-blue mountains of Mexico beyond the desert.

THERE WAS a desolate little store and cantina a few miles below the border, where border guards and riff-raff made occasional stops for food and drink. Clyman stopped here and treated himself to a mescal while the others, except Applegate, waited outside. He talked to the proprietor, a fat *mestizo* named Corrales.

He bought Corrales four drinks and then backed into his subject. He was taking a train of stagecoaches to *la capital* for the Mexican government. Which government? Ah, the revolutionary government of Juarez. He wondered what he could hope for on the trail.

Corrales fished a fly from his drink with a fat forefinger. Only the Indios, *capitán,* and the *reaccionarios,* and of course the *bandidos.* I know of no soldiers this far north, though in Sinaloa—" He shrugged. "But there is a gentle murderer by the name of Jesus Calzadillos in Chihuahua. He might have been here last week; how should I know? He has not the money for uniforms for his men, so he is still a *bandido.* He knows many tricks with ants and honey."

Jess stacked fifty pesos on the counter. "We know a few with rifles. But if you see him, tell him we were heading for Hermosillo, eh?"

They rolled steadily through the day, coming at sundown to the shore of Lago de Los Patos. Clouds of ducks and cranes rose at their approach; some of the men had loaded with birdshot and enough were brought down for several meals. They were on a dark plain reaching distantly to the east and running up against a chain of mountains a few miles to the west. Wild hay, green and young-tasselled, rustled hub-high to the coaches. The teamsters were to draw extra pay as stock handlers. They watered the horses and mules, grained them, and two of the men saddled to guard the herd through the night.

The wagons and coaches were drawn up in a circle, with the supper fires inside. Ben Dallas had appointed himself caretaker of the Shelby girl. He brought a leather seat cushion for her to sit on at dinner. He carried her a tin plate heaped with fried meat and potatoes. Jess bottled his scowls until the conversation came around to the war.

Dallas said, "Miss Shelby tells me it's a crime what them Yankees have already done in Kentucky. A disgrace. Farms pillaged with the crops just coming through the ground! Women and kids killed and—"

"So I hear tell," said Donovan seriously.

Applegate squinted at a cube of steak on his fork. "I heerd just the reverse. I heerd the Johnnies had raided into Ohio and burned a town clean to the ground."

Dallas leveled a finger at him. "Now that," he said, "is a damned—excuse me, miss—an everlastin' lie."

The word was on Dallas' tongue. But Jess came in sharply. "We're going to have a house rule on this trip. Anybody that talks politics gets his tongue hauled out by the roots. There's only one thing has caused more trouble than women, and that's politics."

The firelight had its sparks in Susan's eyes. "You don't approve of the South, Mr. Clyman?"

"I didn't say that. I said I don't approve of wrangling over things nobody knows anything about."

"I know something about the South. My father—"

"I know. If I wanted to know about the South, I'd ask a Northerner. If I wanted to know about the North, I'd ask you. Then I'd figure both were telling ten per cent of the truth, and I still wouldn't know anything."

HE SAW the watchful faces about the fire studying him. A throb of anxiety woke in him. He had suddenly the feeling that he was talking to a jury, that the things he said might come back at him

from a prosecutor's mouth. He heard Hugh Donovan state, "You must have some feelings about it. It's pretty big."

"It's too big to decide in thirty days. When it comes to things like that, I like to grind on them a while before I make up my mind. I wish more politicians were that way. But the one thing I can tell you is that we're out here to drive some stages fifteen hundred miles south. We'll have Indians to fight, *bandidos,* and, like as not, fevers. But if I can help it, we aren't going to fight each other."

Dr. Bible nodded, glints of humor in his eyes, his long face gouged by light and shadow. "Spoken like a statesman. I'll be glad to perform that operation you spoke of, Clyman, on the first man who talks politics."

"Or woman?" the Shelby girl put tartly.

Bible smiled. "A pretty woman has certain rights, one of which is not to turn a man's words back upon him."

Susan finished her dinner quickly and rose to go to her coach. Dallas started to get to his feet to escort her but Jess put a hand on the man's shoulder. "My monuments are built and my claim recorded," he said softly.

Dallas's broad, heavy-browed face watched him a moment and then turned away. Jess walked after her. He took her arm as they went through the grass. "Sue, I'm sorry. I'm on neither side. But politics could split this train right up the middle."

"Politics have split the country. Is your train more important than your country?"

"That," Jess said, "is one of the prettiest pieces of feminine logic I have ever heard. I have an idea if I were to put that question to you ten days from now, you'd say the train was more important even than whether Alabama keeps her slaves or turns them loose."

He saw the white anger coming into her face. He gripped both her hands. "I said I was sorry. Let's leave it like that."

She turned away without a word and mounted the step of her coach.

IN THE middle of the night a shot split the prairie with a clean, echo-less, spiteful crack. Jess, sleeping under the stage, rolled out of his blankets and began pulling on britches and boots, swearing. The sound wasn't close but it was followed immediately by the soft rush of horses' hoofs. Applegate was raising a profane clatter atop the coach. They heard the racket of horses falling and squealing; they were hobbled to make herding easier, and seemed to be falling all over themselves in the attempt to run.

There came another shot and a cry. Jess swerved around the rear boot of the coach and found his pony loosely saddled. He fumbled with the latigo, hearing Dr. Bible shouting, "Clyman! What in hell?"

"Horse raid!" Jess yelled.

Only six men had saddles, though there were saddle horses among the wagon stock which had been kept in the circle for emergencies. He mounted and rode over to where Bible, Applegate, Ben Dallas and three hostlers were saddling. For a moment his impulse was to order them onto a firing line beneath the stages: This could be a raid by *bandidos,* revolutionaries or Indians. It was not likely a raiding party of less than twenty-five or thirty. But it would merely be slow death to be marooned without stock.

The horses were making so much noise, about a quarter-mile west, that it was no trick to follow. Leading out, Clyman found the dark bulk of the herd. He pulled in. The others ranged in beside him. He told Applegate and Dallas to cut north around the tail of the herd and sent three others against the flank.

Then they heard a horseman hammering down out of the darkness to the north. The men deployed while Jess waited. The man pulled in short of him and apparently was endeavoring to find the riders he had heard. Clyman recognized the stringy shape of Toll Breckwalter, one of the night guards. He called to him and rode forward.

Breckwalter was winded and his voice was high and stretched. "They knocked Ashley over. There was only a couple of them, it sounded like. I think the horses are just boogered."

They rode out and found the horses slowing, beginning to scatter. There was no indication of raiders. Jess left four men to gather the herd and they rode back to find Sam Ashley.

They came in with Ashley twenty minutes later. The fire had been built up, water was heating, and Bible spread a blanket

on the ground and motioned the men to lay the wounded man on it. He worked without much sureness, it seemed to Jess, and the smell about him was not of disinfectants but of whiskey. Bible brought a mashed lead ball from the man's hip with tweezers. While he was cleaning the wound of the now-rousing patient, he pulled out a bit of wadding. He dropped it in the granite washbasin. Something about it caused Jess to pull it out on a matchstick to examine it.

He grunted and dropped it into the fire. It was the paper patch which had been wrapped about the ball. Evidently the gunman had fumbled in loading, lost the patch, and torn a bit of paper off something in his pocket to replace it. What he had wrapped about the ball was the corner of an American dollar bill.

HUGH DONOVAN came in a few minutes later. His horse had been worked hard and he threw a blanket over it before he joined the others at the fire.

Jess asked, "Where were you? Did they run you off, too?"

The firelight stroked the hard planes of Donovan's face. "I heard the horses moving before it happened. I didn't see any call to turn the camp inside out. I went out to see."

"Two jaspers sloping for the mountains, after the shot. They got Sam?"

Bible muttered, staring into the fire as he sat cross-legged. "He may live the night. He won't live the week." No one commented, and the lanky physician with his gray-green cat's eye glinting stared around the circle.

The party broke up. Applegate was grunting as he tried to make himself comfortable on his straw shakedown. Jess climbed to the box and reached under the seat. He kept his maps there, and suddenly too many things pointed to the fact that they might be as important to someone else as they were to him. He grubbed deeper among the tools and odds and ends: The long roll was gone.

Applegate heard him curse. "Now what?"

Jess sat on the seat, gazing into the darkness. Finally he turned. "Applegate, how do your politics run?"

The driver lay on his belly on the deck to stare at him. "You ain't going to start a political argyment with me, now?"

"Not if you're Union. Otherwise, keep still."

"I'm from Pennsylvania. Going back one day and likely join up."

"My plans, too, only I'm for California where I come from. Gil, the maps are gone."

Applegate groaned. "Maybe they shook out. We can ride back."

"No. Somebody took them tonight because I was tracing tomorrow's travel after dinner."

"You know how to git them back, don't you. Shake down every man in camp and shoot the sonofa—"

". . . There's a better way. We aren't lost because I've got a small duplicate in my boot. I think they'll be brought back if we keep still. Gil," he sighed, "this is a misbegotten outfit if there ever was one. A doctor that's turnin' into a drunk, a girl that's too pretty and Southern for anybody's good—and a traitor in camp."

Applegate's cheap vulcanite plates rattled hollowly. "How do you know that?"

"Sam Ashley was shot by somebody in camp. The bullet that shot him carried a paper-patch torn off an American bill. Would Indians or *bandidos* be heeled with American money? They couldn't spend it."

They both looked down at the sleeping circle of the camp with its surging red heart of dying coals. Applegate asked slowly, "Who do you reckon—"

"I think I can find out. But I can't go to shooting my mouth off too quick because he may have friends. He may have about twenty friends and nobody but you and me for enemies. We may know within forty-eight hours. We'll hit the cut-off to Texas at El Venado. It's marked on the map. If anybody else wants these stages of mine, I don't think he'll want to travel any deeper than that."

THE morning was as many mornings would be before they reached Mexico City. Lame stock to tend, feed to dole out, running gear to tar. When Jess gave the order to stretch out, Applegate remarked drily, "They're back now."

"Did you see who returned them?"

Applegate let the lines slip through his fingers, adjusting them. "Yup."

"The girl?"

Applegate glanced at him. "You don't seem surprised."

"I'd have been surprised if whoever wanted them had the guts to do it himself."

He didn't let his emotions get into his voice but he couldn't keep them out of his head. It made him want to punish her before everyone. She was a damned brainless little tramp, a catspaw who didn't stop to look at end results when she went into a thing. But she was a lovely tramp, and she had her fingers on the strings that governed his life in a disturbing way. But if he had to sleep with every *chamaca* in every pueblo they passed, he wouldn't let her know she meant any more to him than she had when they left.

Through a morning of almost summer warmth, they wound deeper into the vast cattle empire of Chihuahua. Sam Ashley died without regaining consciousness; they buried him beside the road.

The stage trail to Chihuahua City was a deep trough in the tall grass along the base of the blue mountains. If it continued in as good condition, they would make the city in five days. They would reach El Venada, and the junction of the Texas trail, by the following evening.

Jess Clyman's gaze ranged continually along the foothills. These Tarahumare Indians were rough; Jesus Calzadillos, the *bandido* who aspired to be a general, might be even rougher. He could trade coaches for money, uniforms, weapons. A picket-like line of trees made a dark piping on the mountain-locked prairie ahead of them. Rio Tula cut its sharp scallops among the trees and emptied into a muddy seep far to the east. Jess and Donovan rode ahead to scout the trees before bringing the coaches on. It was safe, and Donovan lingered to study the land up west, toward the hills.

"I seen antelope rumps up there, Jess. We'd better git 'em whilst we can."

He looked back for approval, and found Jess's eyes on him in level, unfriendly scrutiny. Jess said, "You've got plenty of plans but not quite enough guts to shove them through."

Donovan stirred on the saddle. He cleared his throat. "What's got into you, Jess?"

"Too many killings. You sicced Naylor onto the coaches and then shot him. You killed Sam Ashley last night. Let me have your poke." His revolver came out with smooth, disarming speed.

Donovan's brows pulled. "A detective one minute, a highwayman the next."

"Let's see your purse!"

The stage man pulled a chamois bag with a clasp top from his hip pocket. He tossed it to Jess. Jess heard the dull clink of coins as he caught it. He opened it and pulled out a roll of bills that lay on top. He peeled off the top one and found a torn corner. He put the rest of the money back into the purse and tossed it to Donovan.

"Still a detective. Doc Bible pulled the other part of this bill out of Ashley's wound. What's your game?"

Donovan pocketed the leather purse and drew one boot from the stirrup and put his leg across the saddle swell. "You've got a lot of ideas. What's your idea about this?"

"Either you're a transplanted copperhead, or you think you ought to have the stages instead of me. Which is it?"

Donovan's wide mouth smiled. "Do either of those notions jibe with trying to burn the coaches?"

Jess had not yet reconciled it himself. He shook his head. "But I'll swear you had a finger in it."

Donovan smiled. "In a way. Rice and Naylor were good men, but crazy as hoot-owls. I told them you were taking the coaches to Mexico to ship to California for the northern supply route. The same as I told them all. That was just to bring them along, but the damned fools got patriotic fever and decided to burn them before we left. Well, a burned stagecoach is no good to anybody, and I'm glad I came along in time to help you clean 'em out."

"What about the stock raid last night?"

Donovan wiped his mouth. "The sooner I can stall you, the better I'll like it. This is a hare-brained idea of going to Mexico. You'll never make it. But I figure a man could cache these Concords down near Laredo and make a deal with the julep-merchants. In fact, now that you're in on it, I'll split with you."

Jess laughed briefly. "You can look down the barrel of a gun and make an offer like that!"

DONOVAN shook his head. "You ain't going to kill me, Jess. You can't afford to. The boys would lynch you. They're mine, every damn' one of them! Even the girl. Not counting the sawbones and Applegate, of course. What are you going to do about it?" He didn't give Jess long to reply. He said, "Jess, there ain't nothing you can do about it. You came out with your guard down. I'm giving you your chance: Take off right now and keep your health."

Jess grunted and put his Colt away. "You're a pretty good chess player but you want to look in back of you as well as in front. If you took these coaches, you wouldn't dare go back to El Paso. They may be fighting there already. And you'll find getting to Laredo is more than tracing the route on a map stolen by an empty-headed little tart. Remember those greasers were trained to kill Yankees down there only ten years ago. A lot of them still make it a hobby. Donovan, if you got to the border I'd be as wrong as a man ever was. You'd ask about the next waterhole and they'd direct you to a salt sink. You'd try to shake out of them which Indians to trust and which not to, and they'd lie and then send somebody to let them start their dance. You're a hell of a fine schemer, except that you forgot something: You're in a foreign country that would still be at war with us if it had the money."

Donovan's broad brown face with its tough brows received it impassively. "I wasn't brought up in a lady's seminary. I'll take on any fifty greasers you can pick."

Jess laughed in his face. "You're a good barracks fighter, but your guts will turn to water in the field. The Mexicans have a song that goes, 'For zarapes, Saltillo. For soldiers, Chihuahua. For women, Jalisco . . .' This is Chihuahua. Every peasant sucking sap out of a cactus dreams of being a soldier; and if you go along the way you think you will, a few of them are going to put their heads together and start an army."

Donovan's eyes scoffed. "What makes you better at getting through than I am?"

"Because I know them. And I've got letters. When I get into the danger zone I'll hire guides, on the strength of my let-

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ters." He shook his head, smiling confidently. "I'd hang you for killing Ashley, except for one thing: The boys might hang me. So we seem to be stalemated. You can't do without me, and I can't get rid of you—yet. We'd better try a few more moves until one of us thinks of a way to clip the other."

He turned his pony and rode back, showing Donovan the broad target of his back . . .

REACHING the train, Jess tied his pony on behind and climbed up beside Applegate. Gil took the Concord through the bright splashing little river. Donovan was out of sight, having gone after the antelope. And this was a tribute to Jess's dialectics, for about fifty per cent of what he had given the stage man was fancy. Donovan had him in the tightest spot a man ever squeezed into. How many of the wagoners he owned, Jess couldn't guess. He hadn't owned Ashley, that was obvious. And he didn't own Gil Applegate. But Ashley was dead, and Applegate and he made only two against twenty-four.

Jess looked back over the train. Susan Shelby, riding the box beside Ben Dallas as he brought the coach through the water, was leaning over to look at the stream. She appeared warm and uncomfortable in her heavy traveling dress. Suddenly she looked up at Jess.

"Mr. Clyman, will we hit another stream tonight?"

"Not for two days."

"Then I'm going to ask you to wait up ahead a few minutes while I bathe. I haven't been so warm and dusty since I left the Oxbow."

"Go right ahead. The boys will enjoy it."

Some of the men chuckled. Susan put her chin up as color flooded her face. "Please stop and let me down," she said to Dallas. Dallas handed the team in. She closed her parasol with a snap. "You can go along for a mile or so and someone can come back after me." Imperiousness was out of place in someone six inches shorter than anyone else in the party.

Jess smiled. "You aren't afraid of the Indians or Calzadillos?"

"Not if you don't go off and leave me."

"I ought to. There's an old saying about an eye for an eye. Do you understand?"

She saw the double-meaning and her lips parted. Before she could reply, Jess sent the cavalcade forward with a downsweep of his arm. He signaled Dallas to drop the saddle horse trailing his coach. He glanced back a few minutes later and she was not in sight, but a white petticoat lay across a bush.

Everyone seemed to think it a good joke, except Dallas. The big driver drove in sombre displeasure. Finally he pulled out a silver pocket watch.

"Fifteen minutes," he said. "Dammit, Clyman, you'd ought to know better than that. There's danger of Indians; and in the second place she ain't dressed to fork a saddle."

"It was her idea. It'll do her good."

Dallas' eyes combed the back country. He turned on the seat. "I'm going back for her."

Jess dropped down and went to seize the leader's tug. "You're going to keep right on, mister."

Dallas stood up. "Leave holt of that tug."

"Swing those horses back in line and keep moving," Jess snapped.

He released the trace, but as he did so Dallas brought the horses around. Jess swerved to catch the tug. Dallas, still on his feet, sent the thirty-foot whip out in a savage cast. The cracker caught Jess on the side of the neck. The pain was swift and disarming; he felt blood seeping down into his shirt. Dallas gave the whip to the horses on his next throw and they went lunging past the pony. Jess shook his head to clear it. Then he ran to untie his horse, mounted and started after him. Dallas had turned the horses loose. They were trying to climb through the collars; the coach rocked like a baby buggy on the uneven ground.

CROSSING behind it, Jess loped up the off side, holding his pace until he could lean over and close his hands on the siderail across the seat from Dallas. He left the saddle like a bull-dogger taking his ox, finding the floor with one boot and hauling himself up beside the driver. Dallas took a swift dally of the lines about the brake and, twisting on the seat, fired a looping overhand blow at Jess' chin. Jess

took it on the shoulder, but it had the shocking power of a sledge.

Wild-eyed, Dallas lunged after him. Jess, slamming his punches aside, cuffed him on the ear. Dallas shook his head and scowled. He was a handpegged sort of man with the virility and homeliness of the country. He would not be taken to pieces by a few blows any more than a homemade saloon counter would collapse under a drunkard's fist. Jess' knuckles ached with a follow-up blow to the driver's forehead; but Dallas kept soberly about his business of pawing for a hold and clubbing with a fist like a bungstarter. He hammered the meaty edge of that fist into the muscle at the base of Clyman's neck. It locked him in an aching paralysis. Jess had to let his right arm hang and jab with his left. Dallas circled both arms about his neck, locked them with a fist clamped on his own wrist, and hauled Jess' head down. His knee drove up. Jess took it on the cheekbone. Staggered, he reached up and got both hands on Dallas' windpipe. He had the sense to hang on while the driver clawed at his face: man forgot everything when his breathing was tampered with.

Jess hung on like a badger. Now the hands muling over his mouth and eyes seemed to push more than to gouge. He got an urgent note into the snoring gasps he managed to force past the blockade of Jess' thumbs. Something was off-key. Dallas was not fighting. He was floundering.

Jess stared at him. The driver's eyes were focussed beyond the stage, off on the prairie. Involuntarily, Jess relaxed. Dallas gasped, "*Bandidos!* Bandits, by God!"

Out of a foothill barranca, two miles west of the stalled wagon train, lurched a winding string of horsemen. They were crossing rimrock, but making time. They wore the white pants and shirts of peasants. The sun struck blue glints from their rifles.

Catastrophe has a fascination, a beauty and balance, and Jess stood there an instant almost in admiration of it. A quarter-mile south were the wagons. A mile north was Susan Shelby, washing her body. There were at least forty bandits. Jess counted twenty-five in his outfit. Susan was in this spot despite his advice, but a woman was a woman, and, damn it, had to be protected.

A single shot cracked and the echoes poured down from the foothills. He saw a rider lope out of a brush thicket ahead of the outlaws and pound toward the caches and wagons waiting in a line as neat as a family of ducks on a pond. Applegate yelled something and hawed his team around to outline the circle.

The pony was back where Jess had left it. He shouted at Dallas, "Pull 'em in! Let me off to go get the girl. Blow your bugle and give her time to start dressing. If she gets stubborn come in without her. They may not find her."

Dallas was unable to stop the wild run of the team. He swung them and headed back toward Clyman's horse while they cooled off. They came out of their headlong run and Jess jumped. He seized the reins and made the saddle without touching a stirrup.

The grass was so deep a horse could run safely only on the road ruts, gouged by carts and the stagecoaches. This was an advantage over the raiders, and God knew he needed one. He glanced back as he knifed into the circle just closing up. Dallas had reached the river and someone in a white undergarment was climbing into the coach.

Donovan racked in about a mile ahead of the Mexicans. They were jogging in a switchbacking line down a rocky slope to the grass. They held their guns shoulder-high with one arm and manipulated the reins with the other, as if only this device could retain the horses' balance. Applegate and the others were cutting the horses off the poles and slapping hobbles onto them. Jess yelled at them to throw and tie the horses as well: He wanted neither to stage a battle with seventy-five crazy broncs stampeding around, nor to have them shot.

MOST of the men had seen Indians in action at some time or other but there was no assurance that Mexicans would attack in the same fashion. Certainly not if they had any sense, for they didn't outnumber the wagoners sufficiently to take the risks of circling. Applegate said the only way was to lie under the coaches and wait. But whesn some of the men tried it, they found the grass was so high they couldn't

get a shot at the bandits until they were close enough to strike straight through into the hasty stockade.

This gave Jess an idea. Measuring, he saw Calzadillos' men hitting the grass and letting their jughead ponies romp down across the flats. Less than a half-mile to go, now. But Ben Dallas, standing on the box with both arms extended across the clattering void between the dashboard and the wheelers' rumps, was bringing the Concord in at a full run. They had left a slot for him, and he rammed the coach into it and others piled onto the team and ripped the snaps loose.

Jess had to fire a shot before anyone tamed down enough to listen to him. "Five of you take positions on top of the coaches. The rest of us are going out into the grass. Donovan, you pick ten and I'll take the rest. Crawl about a hundred feet out. Stay down until you've got a sure shot. I figure they'll pull up about there to start peppering."

He looked around, taking a quick inventory. The horses were down with a couple of men to watch them. Donovan was tolling off his men, Applegate was jamming an extra Colt under his belt, and at the window of Dallas's coach Susan Shelby's face showed whitely. Doctor Bible stood with a long horse-pistol hanging from his fingers.

They crawled under the wagons and out into the grass. It was tender and moist and fragrant; it absorbed the sound of the running horses almost completely. Yet before he had crawled fifty feet, Jess heard the yells start: *"A bajo los Yanquis! A bajo los Tejanos!"*

He couldn't see the others. He hoped Calzadillos could not, either. A light desert breeze stroked the grass. His hands sweatily clenched the Dragoon pistol, the offbreed .44 with the barrel of a revolver, and the stock and firepower of a repeating rifle. He waited until his nerves were pulled out to a plucked tautness. His body throbbed to the hammer-blows of hoofs in the earth. He heard the men on the Concords begin to fire and a voice shouted something in Spanish so close he could hear the breathiness of it:

"Bajen ustedes!" Dismount. . . . Jess ripped out a rebel yell and came to his knees. The peasant army, uniformed in the garb of poverty, carrying weapons out of style for twenty years, was scrambling out of the high wooden trees. There was an Oriental cast to the faces Jess saw, the eyes narrow and wispy, with lip-and chin-beards marking most of them. He picked out a hatless outlaw who wore a red-and-gray poncho for his target. The man was about forty feet away. He put a shot into the outlaw's side as he left the saddle. Then he cocked the gun again and heard Gil Applegate's gun roar a few yards to his right. A second outlaw fell before he knew he had been fired at.

Heads were popping up all around, with every cheek against a gunstock. Gunfire crackled with the uneven tempo of popcorn explosions. There was hardly a chance for a man to miss at this range. Ponies and their riders threshed in the grass; bandits came up on their stirrups and were pitched from the saddle.

Back about fifty feet was a lean, hawk-faced Mexican with a conical sombrero crusted with silver and a horse carrying forty pounds of it on his bridle. This man fired a shot from his rifle and suddenly wheeled and started back up the long slope to the foothills. As an afterthought he turned to shout, *"Haga a atrás!"* This merely made it official, as every *bandido* who was able to roll a spur was already falling back.

CHAPTER THREE

Spy in Calico

THERE was powder and ball in the downed outlaws' pouches, but the guns were cumbersome and rusty. Jesus Calzadillos must wait many months before he could call himself a general. He had left sixteen of his men on the ground. Bible took care of the wounded and they left them covered with their own saddle blankets. None of the Americans had taken a wound.

Darkness settled sootily over the prairie. There was not a peasant's *jacal* to break the limitless dark with a light, nor a town to glow beyond a hill: Nothing but their three cook-fires, shining clean and clear as stars in the cold desert night. The men were exhausted with the aftermath of the fight. They ate hungrily, chewing poorly

cooked duck, fried onions and camp bread burned on the bottom. Jess looked them over, trying to catch some indication from each man's face or actions as to how he stood—with him or against?

Susan he did not look at at all. Ben Dallas kept forcing food on her, and her good-nature was wearing thin. He made a loutish boastful lover of the "feel-them-muscles" school.

Clyman made an offhand speech. "You've had your baptism. They may keep on baptizing us all the way. Things are apt to be tougher than I thought. The saloonkeeper at the border warned me that the Juaristas and the reactionaries are making trouble everywhere. It's a religious war, and there's nothing worse."

He saw Susan's eyes on him, dark and timid. He heard Breckwalter, partner of the man who had been killed the night before, say gruffly, "Anybody can start a thing. Not everybody can finish it."

Jess caught his eyes. "But nobody can finish it with a split crew." From his tin plate, Hugh Donovan's gaze rose slowly and with a dogged thrust. Donovan said nothing, but light ran fluidly along the browned barrel of his saddle gun lying across his lap. "Last night," Jess said, "somebody borrowed my maps. I got the impression he might be planning an excursion of his own. Maybe to Laredo. All I want to say now is that it's to that man's interest, and his friends', if he has any, to stick with the train. The Texas trail is suicide. Where we're going, we've got a chance. Make up your minds what you want: To die rich or to live well-heeled."

He went over to his own coach, stripped off his buckskin shirt and hung a lamp in a window and a mirror against a trim poplar panel. He got out his shaving things and worked up a crisp lather. As he daubed it on his jaws, he saw Susan's reflection in the mirror. He didn't turn. She stood there a moment.

"I'm sorry, Jess."

"About what?"

That stopped her momentarily, and when he looked down she was obviously trying to decide what he knew, exactly. "About . . . making you let me bathe," she said.

"That's all right. It would have been your funeral if they'd found you before they found us."

SHE sat on the sill of the door. All the pride and petulance was out of her face tonight. "You don't like me, Jess, do you?"

The razor whispered along his jaw. "It's your friends I don't like."

She frowned. "Ben Dallas?"

"No. Hugh Donovan."

"Donovan is no particular friend of mine. I've hardly spoken to him since we left. What do you mean?"

"You aren't friendlly enough with him to steal a roll of maps for him?"

He heard the quick indraw of her breath. He turned with the razor loaded with

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lather peppered with stubble; suddenly he flicked it and the lather struck her on the mouth. "It was nice of you to bring them back. You'd make a dandy little spy, except that you haven't the sense to go with your lack of scruples."

She wiped the lather away, tears starting in her eyes. "I didn't do it for Donovan," she said, falteringly. "I did it for myself. For what I believe in."

He laughed. "What do you believe in: Susan Shelby? That she should never go hungry, dirty or unsatisfied?"

"I—I believe in the things the South stands for."

"What does it stand for?"

"For—for states' rights, and a low tariff, and—"

"One thing I would never make a thief and a liar out of myself for is a slogan. Those are the things they've told you. Are you sure enough about them to condemn Applegate and me to death, and take a chance of being massacred on a lost trail yourself?"

Susan looked up at him, earnest but confused. "I didn't do any such thing! Mr. Donovan told me you weren't taking these stages to Mexico to sell, at all. That you were going to ship them to California to use against the Confederacy. I wanted to know. I thought you might have traced the route on the map. . . ."

He examined her eyes and mouth, and all he could see was sincerity. Yet he remembered how stealthily she had stolen the maps, how completely selfish every act of hers that he had witnessed had been. He turned back to the mirror and blaced the bright edge of the razor against a sideburn.

"I'm going to give you some advice. Get right with me or with Donovan damn' quick. We hit the Texas cutoff tomorrow, and it's just possible Donovan will call out the guard then. He can take nearly every man I've got. They may kill me, or they may just rob me. But whichever they do, they'll know they've been about the doing of it."

When everyone else had turned in, Clyman went out to inspect the stock, and returned in fifteen minutes, throwing his bedroll under the crimson coach and sliding into the blankets. He lay there about an hour, and then silently rolled out of them into the grass. He left the blankets tousled. He crawled about fifty feet and lay in the deep mat of wild grass. If an attack came, it would come with a shot at him.

He held to one fact: That Donovan had not had time before leaving El Paso to do a thorough job of hand-picking a crew. There must be some of the drivers with Northern leanings, or merely honest ones. Some men who could see through his pratings of Confederacy to the fundamental fact that he was acting for the good of Hugh Donovan. These were the men Jess hoped he had reached with his campfire preachment.

It was damp and cold in the grass, and the fire sank to embers and the stars burnished themselves on the black velvet of the sky. Horses moved in the yonder distance, scuffing over rocks. Jess was barely able to see them, moving across a ridge. His heart thudded. They were moving faster than grazing horses moved. Then from the camp he heard sounds carefully-muffled; a man dropped silently from a coach and stepped through the ring of Concords to step into the grass. Another appeared with a saddle over his shoulder. They came like shadows from all parts of the camp, filing out into the grass: Ten, eleven, twelve . . . They did not gather, but moved in a broken line toward the horse herd. There were sixteen of them, and Donovan's massive shape led the rest.

CHAPTER FOUR

For Blue or Gray

JESS did some calculations. Sixteen moving out meant eight left behind. Assume these eight were loyal. They were still out-numbered two-to-one. Jess could throw down on them, drop a couple, and be killed with the rest when Donovan marshaled his men.

They walked with hardly a sound in a straight line from the stages toward the mountains. The horses had disappeared over the ridge. There were left nine men, a girl, and twelve stagecoaches with nothing to pull them. As the deserters crossed the ridge, Jess got up and walked into camp. He went around and glanced at each man, his Colt in his hand. They were sleeping, not lying there waiting for

a signal to kill the dubious ones. Jess climbed a wheel and shook Gil Applegate. The old driver grunted and raised his head. A gun was in his hand.

"Get up," Jess said.

Applegate groused. "This is a helluva early start."

"The horses are gone. Along with Donovan, Dallas and fourteen others."

Applegate's toothless jaws sagged as Jess swung down. Then he began to mouth curses as he produced a pair of plates and jammed them into his mouth.

They wore out the night in vigilance. Susan Shelby awoke when the smoke of the breakfast fire drifted across the coach where she lay sleeping. There were sounds of her dressing, and at last she appeared and came toward the fire in the brisk early morning. She stopped in surprise and gazed about. There was no sign of saddle horses, and there was a grim handful of men squatting about the fire eating fried fat pork and thick slabs of bread.

No one looked at her. She got a cup and poured herself coffee. Then she stood by Jess. "There's something wrong," she said. "What is it, Jess?"

"Nothing, much. They've moved out, is all. We've still got all the coaches but they've got the horses."

She gasped and glanced westward at the spot where the horses had been pastured. Jess smiled. "A hitch? Were they supposed to take you with them?"

She looked at him in quick vexation but she held her anger. "No. Only—I don't see—"

"What they can do with the horses, if they don't have the coaches? Let's put it another way: What can we do with twelve Concords if we don't have horses to pull them?"

Breckwalter, the ponderous, frowning partner of murdered Sam Ashley, glowered into his tin cup. "Put rock foundations under them and start sod-busting," he said. "I tell you one thing: I ain't going to pull any stagecoach to Mexico City."

Susan sat down. "You mean we're—"

"Stranded is a good word," Jess remarked. "They took the precaution of packing out most of the food they could carry. Or probably what they did was to drop a sack of meal here and a flitch of bacon there, as we came along the last day. So we can't start hiking back to El Paso, a hundred and seventy miles, without grub. And we can't stay here. We'll have to hike for El Venado, the nearest village, and live on tortillas until we can get back to the States."

He started a cigarette. "Patriotism in action is a pretty thing. Patriotism to the Confederate States of Hugh Donovan."

Applegate had been mulling it over painstakingly half the night and still did not comprehend the strategy. "Why didn't they knock us off and take both, right then?"

"Because he was only sure of those fifteen, and we'd have been sure to knock off a few of them if he cut loose on us. But there was this other way that they could get the whole kit and b'iling without firing a shot. They're holding the horses somewhere, and I've got a notion they're watching us right now. When we start hiking for El Venado, they'll come back pronto and hitch up. They'll by-pass El Venado and head for Texas."

Susan put the coffee cup down. "Jess, am I responsible for this?"

His eyes were calm and heatless. "Not necessarily. Not unless you got the map on his orders and let him see it. If you didn't, we'd have to assume he knew the trails anyway."

She stood up, looking at him in bewilderment. "I didn't know! I argued with him when he told me you were a Union agent. He said he'd prove it to me if I'd get the maps. I did, and he pointed out some marks I didn't understand, and copied the part of the trail to Laredo. Jess—all of you—I'm sorry. He made a fool of me, and I put you into his hands. I'll do anything you tell me to to try to make it up."

She waited, and still no one spoke, until Applegate slung his coffee into the fire and growled, "That's a hell of a pot of coffee somebody made. You'd better float a rag in 'er next time."

THEY puttered about, getting the feel of catastrophe. A couple of drivers commenced walloping dust off the varnished red panels of their coaches with long rags. Applegate removed a wheelnut

and slipped the wheel to the outside of the spindle to dope it with grease. At the fire, Jess was molding ball-lead when he saw this. An idea entered his head, nebulous as steam. But he examined it from all angles, buttressed it with conjectures, and it began to acquire shape and force.

Jess walked over and looked at the wheel-nut. It was large, hexagonal, slotted for a cotter-key. He said, "I'm going to borrow this," and walked around the coach. He compared it with nuts on the reach-and-bolster assembly; with the nut on the kingpin fastening the tongue to the hound. Carefully he went over the entire stage, but there was not another nut with which the wheel-nut could be interchanged. Jess walked back. The driver had slipped the wheel to the inside of the spindle, and was waiting for the wheel-nut.

Jess was beginning to smile. "Take a water-bucket," he said, "and start taking all the wheel-nuts off. I'll help you."

Applegate peered at him, not sure whether he liked the idea. He was one who held that a Concord stagecoach was not far from being divine, and it was sacrilegious to tamper with it. Then he seemed to perceive Jess idea," and he chuckled and grabbed a wrench.

They went down the line of coaches, removing wheel-nuts and adding them to the greasy assortment in the bucket. They performed the same operation on the wagons. Then Jess summoned the other men.

"One of you dig a hole," he said. "We're going to hold a burying. Those coaches won't go far without wheel-nuts, and there isn't another nut in the train that will take their place. We're going to bury them here and build a fire over the spot."

He retained the rest of the story until the bucket had been wrapped in a tarp and buried three feet deep. A fire was built on the spot. Jess occupied himself with making up a portable camp-kit from the remaining supplies. They were going on a short trip, but it had to look like a long one. He gathered them at the fire once more.

"I'm taking for granted that Donovan doesn't like being out there in the hills on short rations and not knowing much about the Indians. I think he's watching us right now and waiting for us to leave before he comes back to claim the booty. Well, we're leaving. We're going to walk till dark, or until we spot them. Then we're coming back.

"They ought to make about a hundred yards before they break down. They'll go straight up, but when they come down they'll begin swapping nuts and bolts around trying to rig up something that will get them through. If it's night, they'll need light to work by. If it isn't, we still have the grass for cover. It's two-to-one, but we've got to chance it. Anybody got a better idea?"

Susan, standing back a few paces, said, "Yes. I'll stay here and get them away from the stage coaches while you come in."

They turned to stare at her. She came forward, sober and defiant. Jess tucked his hands under his belt. "Aren't you afraid Donovan will talk you into telling where the wheel-nuts are?"

"That's just what I will tell him." She turned and pointed. "I'll tell them they're right up there on the hillside, about two hundred yards away. That will give you a chance to work back."

Doctor Bible pursed his lips. "If I could just open up your head, young woman, and see what's behind this. It's a twenty-four carat idea, Clyman. The only weakness of your plan is trying to get back in without being seen; because without the surprise element, we're gone goslings."

"And nobody," Jess speculated, "could do it but Sue. She's the only one they'd believe; the only one they wouldn't shoot on sight. All right," he said, "dig up the bucket and we'll take it with us."

It was the hardest slap he could give her; she did not wince. "You don't have to; but I can understand that you'd feel safer."

Gil Applegate brought a shovel but hesitated before commencing to scatter the embers of the fire. "Or you can kill two mallards with one charge," he told Jess. "You can find out by leaving it here whether she's really had a change of heart. Assuming it makes any damn difference to you."

THEY were all looking at him; all but the girl, who had gone back to the coach. In his heart, Jess put it on the scales: Applegate knew damned well it made a difference. It was the only way he could ever be sure of her, but it meant jeopardizing the whole operation to make the test. He shrugged.

"You boys take a vote. I'm ready to leave any time you are."

He walked over and shouldered the canvas roll he had made up for himself. Then he heard someone drop the shovel and the men went to secure their own bedrolls and their rifles. Jess walked to where Susan stood by the coach, her hand on the door. For a moment he stood before her. She bit her lip, but the tears crowded through. It could be the old strength-through-weakness gambit, Jess supposed, but it didn't seem to matter. He dropped the roll and caught her against him. She began to sob, her face buried against his shoulder, and Jess held her tightly. It went beyond politics, treachery or anything else, this feeling that bound him to her; and now he knew she was as helpless to fight it as he.

"I've been an empty-headed little fool!" she whispered. "Trying to be a gentlewoman, instead of the kind of woman you needed. Why didn't you straighten me out a long time ago?"

Jess' fingers were in her hair; he felt the softness of her bosom against him. "You were the kind of woman I needed right from the first. Sue, how am I going to leave you here?"

"It's the only way," she said. "I'll tell them I refused to go with you. Let's think about Mexico City and after that, California— We'll work something out of this."

Jess was thinking of those things— But Applegate, the doctor, and the rest were already tramping out a patch to the spot on the hillside where the wheel-nuts were supposed to be buried. Under his belt he had shoved the revolver he had taken from Ashley's body. He made her take it. "You won't need this; but it will make me feel better."

"I'll need you though, Jess. Always!"

* * *

They set out in late afternoon in a brief file down the freight road. It sloped gently for a mile and then climbed a ridge and dipped again. On their right were the mountains. Eastward was a ghost of a peak. They made slow marching, not anxious to get far from the train. The coaches were out of sight in a half hour, but they left Applegate in a nest of boulders on the first ridge, from which he could observe anyone approaching and give the signal.

Before long they stopped to rest. They had made about three miles. Gil had given no signal. He was to come down the ridge if he saw anything and signal with a rag tied to his rifle barrel. The sun was close to the ragged skyline of the Sierra Lagartijas. Warmth was leaving the air. The long shadow of the mountains came across them and a cold breeze flowed down from the north. They marched again.

Jess began to realize how high a tower he had built on a foundation of speculation. Hugh Donovan might play it safe and remain out of reach for a week. The

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only argument against that was that he would be anxious to get out of the country without delay.

The swift desert night flowed over them. They camped and made a fire. But none of them ceased to watch the now lost ridge on their backtrail. The night signal would be a charge of powder burned on the ground. They boiled coffee, but no one had a hunger bigger than a hardtack could satisfy. They were sitting there sopping hardtack in coffee when suddenly all of them lunged to their feet and someone said, "By God, boys!"

The powder had flared too brightly and so briefly that it was difficult to believe it had happened at all. Donovan was coming back.

THEY left everything by the fire except their rifles. They set out at a jog and rested in twenty minutes. Did the signal mean Donovan was already there or merely on the way? They had to assume it meant he was very close. The road tilted again. They were on the long swale of the ridge. They stopped and blew, and not far off they could hear someone moving carefully among the rocks. They were closer than they had thought.

Jess eared back the hammer of his carbine, in case it was not Gil up there, and walked onto the crest of the ridge. The driver slipped out of the boulders, gripped Jess' arm and pointed.

"Horses are yonder," he whispered. "They only got here about ten minutes ago. Come down from the foothills."

As he spoke, a lantern-wick made a small eye of light among the stages, growing until it was a golden puddle on the trampled earth near the dead fires. Men moved about confusedly. Harness rattled, chains clinked. Then the lantern moved from the camp in quick, swinging arcs. Several men were moving up the hillside.

Jess started down the hill. The plan was for Applegate to take four men and work around to the left, to a point near the false cache. They could ambush several men here, if they were lucky. Jess would take on the ones at the camp. The grass, deep and thick, muffled their boot-sounds; not far off, on their right, the horses moved restlessly under guard. They walked slowly toward the dark ring of coaches. Applegate led off with his men, making a wide swing to the left. Jess signaled the others down. They began a slow crawl toward the coaches, fanning out to enclose half of it.

They were like this when the shot exploded. One of the horse-holders fired blindly into the loose pack of them and shouted.

"Injuns, by God!"

The shot screamed away over the prairie. Jess could see the man limned against the horses. He aimed and fired; the gun kicked like a mule and the man pitched forward. It was ninety per cent luck, but it was one man less to handle, nevertheless. He ran for the coaches and sprawled under the closest one.

Donovan was bringing his men back down the trail, bawling caution. "Spread out! Git clear of them coaches!" But he himself was sprinting back into the area of danger. He had three men with him, revealed by the lantern. Suddenly he realized he was still carrying it and gave it a sling into the grass. It struck a boulder and shattered; whale-oil spread over the rock and immediately there was a nightmarish illumination for the scene.

Gil Applegate's guns were hammering. Two of the men with Hugh Donovan staggered. Donovan darted into the ring of coaches. "Out this side!" he bawled.

JESS hadn't a clear shot at him, but he found big Ben Dallas and put the man's shoulders on his sights and squeezed the trigger. Dallas went to his knees, sagged forward on all fours, his head hanging. Behind Donovan, Applegate's heavy artillery was whanging again. It drove the stage man into the trap he had tried to bull the others out of. He sprawled in the litter of camp gear and tried to pick out a target.

Two men who had been trying to repair the tampered wheels dropped their guns and raised their hands. Donovan fired a shot into one of these men and shouted, "Damned chicken-livered sons! They ain't taking pris'ners tonight! Kill or git killed!"

He had emptied his carbine and lay over on his side to pull his Colt. It came out, and his eyes found Jess at last, am-

(Please turn to page 98)

TENSLEEP'S EMPTY SADDLE

By BART CASSIDY

Take warning, all you sheriffs, longriders and Gentle Annies, for hell's loose in the hills tonight — Tensleep Maxon's greatest friend is dead!

IT'S the hardest week I ever put in, the wickedest test of horse an' man ever faced. It starts between Livingston an' Timberline, where a gent named Rick Ransom raises Morgan-Arabian crosses, famous for beauty, bottom, speed an' savvy. Ever since seein' one at a Denver auction, I've burned. Minute I heard the price—two thousand for a colt—I knowed I wouldn't buy one.

Regret comes now as I crowd swiftly fading Hassan up Gallatin Valley through crisp twilight. Too late, I see the mistake of not casin' the job right. But how could I know that Ransom, newly elected sheriff of Park County, was rarin' to make a

They head straight for me, rifles slanted up

name for himself? How could I have known that a local rustler named Wildhorse Harry has made payin' raids on Ransom's corrals? How could I know gunnies are staked out, watchin' for Harry's return, when I stick my beak in? Crispes!

Some feller once said Fate's a fiddler an' Life's a dance. Well, me an' Hassan dance for life escapin' the Twin R, with Fate fiddlin' bullets behind us. That's incidental. Ransom, young, energetic, ambitious, leads a posse after us, all ridin' the fast critters he breeds on his Twin R. What a chase that turns out to be.

Ransom gets between me an' the Snow Mountains, where Wildhorse Harry's supposed to hole up. He turns me west, skirtin' the Sweetgrass, crossin' the Yellowstone near Big Timber, an' into the Cayuse Hills, stirrin' a brave dust. There's no feed in the Cayuses for Hassan, so I swim the Musselshell, knife through the Belt Mountains near Elk Peak, ease down Sixteen Mile an' struggle over Flathead Pass, through the Gallatins.

Sound easy? Try it out sometime, without food or rest, with no let-up on the part of the hard-gallopin' hell behind. Yeah, hell an' a half. My dust ain't risin' half so high now.

Some people claim only a shallow man trusts in luck. If that's true, I ain't even an inch deep when I hit the Cinnabar roughs an' put all my chips on the turn of the luck. All two of my chips, both white. Hassan's stumblin' now, failin' fast, fightin' gamely but windbroke an' close to bein' foundered. He's given everything he's got an' he won't make even good crowbait now was I to turn him loose, which I can't. In the afterglow, I spot Ransom's dust scarcely a mile behind. He's gainin' now at every jump. Lady Luck, here goes nothin'!

Carefully, I ease Hassan into a gully, down to the bed of the Gallatin. Turning back the way we come, I torment him into the nearest he can come to a gallop. I can hear the Ransom posse as it passes me, higher up, but they can't hear me for their own racket an' the muffling sand under Hassan's hoofs. So, for the tenth time, I lose them manhunters, knowing somehow they'll be on my tail again come daybreak tomorrow. But in the meantime . . .

No mountains ever seemed so high, no trail so long. I lead Hassan part way, wishin' I could carry him. If I can make the Double S, on Standard Creek, Sandifer Sims will fix me up. Cantankerous ol' Sandy used to be a big cowman up in the Hot Creek country. But when his son was killed in a gunfight an' his wife died of grief, he sold to a sheep outfit an' moved to the Madison, taking along one trusted hand—Forty Miler, glandered-up longrider an' rough-string man, long crippled by a bullet in the spine but a tophand in spite of it.

A year ago, them old-timers begged me to stay with 'em, hintin' at business that might interest me. But right then I'm sweatin' to taste some hot chile an' ogle some señoritas, so I refuse an' head south with the geese. Sure hope they don't hold that refusal against me now.

HAVIN' crossed the Madison, I lead Hassan to a bluff, where I can see Sandy's ranch, a mile away among colorin' cottonwoods. "Last mile, pony-hawss," I tell him. "You carry me half way an' I'll walk the rest. After that you'll have belly-deep pasture an' oats the rest of your days. I promise it." He tosses his head, nips at my leg, playful, an' moves out, totterin', wheezin'. He hasn't took ten steps when something spats his hide. He shudders. His legs give way. He falls an' I step free, tumblin' behind his dead body as a rifle snarl crackles through first big daylight. Before I duck, a slug tunnels my hat. Another hits Hassan. A fourth caroms off a cinch ring. Gunfire risin' from yonder hillside, way beyond pistol range. Whee-ew!

Screwed into the dirt, I take stock. Dassent stay here or that bushwhacker'll roundside me. Escapin' by sprintin' is a cold chance. Behind me, body length, is the bluff, my only chance—or is it? I unsnap my rope, drawin' another slug. I hitch around the horn, wriggle backward. Every foot's like a rod as another shot misses. Down the rope I go, hand under hand. When I reach the end, I'm danglin' over tree tops, God knows how far from the ground. It's a case of jump or wait for that gunnie, so I let go, smash through leafy growth, clutch a limb that's tore from my grasp an' plummet into deep barberry.

settin' down, unhurt. A shallow man's trust in luck don't fail him.

I get up, shake myself an' rabbit to'rds Sandy's place, through deep brush. About Hassan, I'm numb. Somehow, I can't mourn him. It's been hell nursin' him across his last miles. It's good he's easy now, travelin' smooth trails. Tall grass, feller.

Down at Sandy's, nobody's home but Trouble. Sandy's shepherd dog lies dead in the cabin doorway. Windows shot out. Furniture overturned. Plenty bullet holes but no blood. Corrals empty, an' Sandy's hell for keepin' horses. Skylines seem clear enough so I take a look in the barn, hopin' one pony is stabled, at least one. Nope, there ain't. But there's a pair of boots stickin' out into the aisle. The body's lyin' face down in the manure. I roll him over. He ain't been dead more'n a few hours. An', while he's been shot in the face, I can easy enough tell he's nobody I know. That's a relief.

Unnerved, exhausted, puzzled an' more'n a little hopeless, I go outside. Where is Sandy Sims? Where's Ol' Forty Miler? Was it one of them that bushwhacked at me, back yonder? Could be, but I'm doubtin' it. The stock is gone, which makes it look like rustling. The dead man? He might be one of the rustlers. Then again, he might be a buckaroo working for Sandy. It's all very puzzling to a very tired man.

The dead man's wearin' a fancy, special made Colt with pearl grips an' gold inlay. Too nice a weapon to weight down a corpse on a moldy manure pile. With that gun stuck in my waistband, I go outside for another look at the skylines. 'Twon't be long till Rick Ransom an' his posse comes roarin' in. Long enough, I wonder, for me to get a meal together?

I hurry to the house, scrape together some cold meat, some left-over pancakes an' about four fingers of Old Trapper, in a pint flask. That last is what the doctor ordered, perkin' me up amazin'. When I down the meat an' pancakes, I've changed my mind about huntin' a hole an' pullin' it in after me. I set out afoot for another ranch I spotted from the head of the valley. It's mebby five mile away.

At this place—the Rafter L it says over the gate—I find nobody home. Though unlike Sandy's place, there's no signs of violence. There's ponies in the corral an', my need bein' great, I saddle one an' cut back, quarterin' across the valley in search of sign. Which I find, cuttin' into the timber, following up a chain of meadows reaching into the Snow Crest Mountains. I follow easy an' careful, takin' no chances, ketchin' a little sleep in the saddle, an' figurin' to do my closin' in along about dusk. But I underestimate the travelin' speed of the rustlers or their hours of travel. From the moon, it's nigh onto midnight when I spot the faint glow of their dyin' fire an' the darker blot of grazin' ponies beyond.

I'm mighty close to the camp when I discover it. I rein right, figurin' to roundside the ponies an' herd 'em right through the camp. But my mount chooses that moment to whinny an' jumpy rustlers are awake to hear it.

"That you, Jonesy?" hollers one an' moonlight glints off the barrels of two levelin' guns. Two! That's the way I had 'er figgered."

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"Jonesy," I concede, mufflin' my voice an' turnin' to'rds 'em. "But not the Jonesy you're expectin'." I jump my mount ahead an' my gun's buckin' in my fist. It ain't an' never was my way to gun any man without an equal chance, but I can't rid my mind of that feller face-down in the manure. Besides, the feller that wins is him that gits there fustest with the mostest, as Ol' Jubal Early said in the Civil War.

I burn down one of that pair an' the other turns, running for his horse. I scorch him up a few an' with my pony almost trompin' his heels, he wheels around, drops his gun, throws his hands to the sky an' screams surrender. I haul up, unsnap the rope from the saddle an' step down to tie him up. An' then my bad guess comes home to roost.

FROM the direction of the snortin' horse herd come a gallopin' pony, crimson gun flashes lickin' past his neck as the rider shoots from the withers. One of his slugs pinks my pony. He lunges, shoulderin' me down. I hang to the rein. The pony drags me a little an' then he's free, gallopin' away. An' death an' destruction roar down on me, spittin' slugs. I realize then it's my bushwhacker who's joined his pards belated.

A bullet furrows my skull an' I roll just in time to avoid the hoofs of the plungin' horse. The rider rears his pony an' I let him have it. He yells, grabs for the horn, weakens an' falls from the saddle.

That should have ended it, but it don't. The gent who surrendered has repented of his weakness, dropped his hands, scrabbled around an' come up with his gun. He takes one at me from little more than arm's length, the flash almost blindin' me, the bullet burnin' between my left arm an' my body. Holy cow, that's close! I take one at him, my aim not so good but my execution better. My slug ketched him in the thigh, above the knee a few inches, droppin' him down screamin'. Wow!

Well, I dab piggin' strings on them polecats with more churlishness than subtlety of contrivance, as the sayin' goes. I'm mad an' they find it out, each one makin' something big of a run-of-the-mill bullet hole, weepin' an' cryin' for mercy.

"To hell with you blood-sweatin' jaspers!" I rage at 'em. "You asked for it an' you're gettin' it! I'm leavin' you here till somebody with a badge on his front can find time to come after you."

"No! No!" wails one. "Don't leave us. We'll bleed to death. We'll starve."

"The coyotes will get us," yelps another. "Or if it comes on to snow, we'll freeze."

"I hope not," I sneer. "I hope you live to hang. What'd you do with Sandy Sims an' Forty Miler?"

"Didn't do nothin' to 'em, honest feller. They're friends of ours . . ."

"I suppose that poor feller you shot in the barn was another friend of yours, eh? Who was he; work for Sandy, did he?"

"Don't know what you're talkin' about," growls one, stubborn.

"Well," I tell 'em. "I'm leavin' you here to do some thinkin'. Before I get back, mebby you'll remember who that dead jigger was. An' why, if you're Sandy's friends, you shot up his house an' run off his stock."

"Sandy an' Forty Miler was away," hollers one, as I move off to ketch one of the loose saddlers. "They taken some colts over to the Big Hole Basin an' the man they left behind was a dirty, double-crossin' snake!"

I don't wait to hear his lies. I ketch the pony that almost run over me a minute ago, croonin' to him, soothin' his overwrought nerves. I give him a sugar lump meant for Hassan, fork him an' round up the rustled horse band. They're full of run an' act like they're glad to go home. All I have to do is to tail along an' try to keep awake. I'm so tired now I'm numb all over, noddin' drowsy, thinkin' some of ropin' myself into the kak when the leaders whinny an' swerve. I come alive swift an' sudden. Dead ahead, blockin' the trail within easy pistol shot, is a gallopin' body of horsemen. Sufferin' sinners, what now?

A dozen strong, they split efficient, half movin' out to cut off the ponies, the rest headin' straight for me, rifles slanted up an' ready. Cripes! Shall I wheel an' run for it? Shall I charge 'em, smokin', an' put my trust in Tensleep luck? Shall I run a long bluff? All kinds of crazy

ideas swarm through my brain an' I wind up playin' 'em for honest night riders an' hailin' 'em jovial. "Howdy, boys. Am I glad to see you. I'm Insomnia Jones, of the Joneses that somebody's always messin' up their sleep . . ."

"A heap interestin', Jones," bawls the burly gent leadin' the parade. "But just so's you stay awake till we finish our chummy little talk, flip yore hands up around yore ears." He reins up, a rod off, an' his rifle drops careless like to cover my brisket.

From where the rustled ponies are bunchin', off to one side, a feller yelps excited. "Nice goin', Pete. This is the bunch—twenty of 'em an' all wearin' Sandy Sims' Cross S."

"Good," raps the deep-voiced leader. "Dehorn the rustlin' critter, Jimmer, an' dab a string onto him . . ."

"What?" I yelps. "Me a rustler? You're crazy. I'm a friend of Sandy's an' when I found he'd been cleaned out, I taken after the rustlers, shot 'em up a batch an' was drivin' the ponies home when I meet up with you gents."

"Yeah?" Pete chuckles, dry. "Go on up to him, Jimmer. You'll know if he's one of Sandy's friends. Don't be scairt. If he tries anything, he'll get the quickest cure for insomnia ever known. Hurry up."

Jimmer, a bald-faced kid an' plainly scairt, edges his horse to'rds me, starin'. "Yep, he's one of the four back-stabbin' coyotes that shot Harry Simson in the back an' shot up the house where I was forted. Harry's buckaroos they were, an' they run off all Sandy's stock. Funny he'd give his right name. Jonesy, Harry called him."

"Look again, son," I taunt him. "Moonlight's affectin' your eyesight. I shot up Jonesy an' two of his pards an' I've got 'em tied up, not two miles back."

"He's lyin'!" snaps Jimmer, takin' my gun an' shakin' out his rope. "Watch out, Pete. It's a trick to toll us under the guns of his pards."

"In which case," chortles Big Pete, "it's worth while checkin'. I hate to quit leavin' the rest of them buzzards free to do more rustlin'. Besides, his yarn might explain that far-off shootin' we heard. Lead out, Jonesy."

Chokin' back my mad, I lead out, six grim riders tailin' me. I whistle as I ride, conscience-free an' sure of bein' cleared of suspicion once we reach them tied rustlers. I don't even blame Jimmer, the kid. My choice of a name was unfortunate an' confusin' to him. Stranger things have happened than that I'd somehow resemble this Jonesy gent.

FROM their talk as we ride back, I gather what happened at Sandy's place. Sandy an' Forty Miler left for Big Hole Basin with some colts, like the rustlers said. While they was gone, leavin' Jimmer to hold down the place, who should show up but a rancher name uh Harry Simson—from east of the Madisons somewhere, with four of his men. They look sorta grim an' won't state their business, Simson sayin' he'll wait for Sandy to get back. The men don't like it an' they head for the barn, quarrelin'. There's a shot an' then them four come runnin' to finish off Jimmer. That ranicky button guns 'em back an' forts up. Come night, he slips away, travelin' all night to get to the ranch of this Pete. After that, it's just a case of follerin' sign—to me.

As we near the place where them rustlers are laid out, I have to smile. Pete an' his men are reviewin' the evidence an' passin' horse-thief justice on me. An' less because of the ponies than because I'm carryin' Harry Simson's fancy six-shooter, with his name engraved on it in gold.

"How can he help but be one of 'em?" asks Pete of his jury. "How else could he get Simson's gun unless he taken it offa the body?"

"You forget that I've got Simson's killers tied up, Pete," I jibe.

"That," he sneers, "I gotta see."

I laugh an' lead 'em into the swale where a taint of smoke still lingers around the rustler's campfire ashes. The laugh freezes in my throat. "Holy cow—NO!" I holler, an' I'm cold all over. "Oh-h-h. —NO!"

"No what?" raps Pete.

"No rustlers," I wail. "Some misbegotten son's slipped in here an' cut them polecats loose. No man livin' can shuck my knots."

They laugh like fools, an' I can't say I blame 'em. Jimmer's offa his horse,

rimmin' around for sign. "Has bin somebody tied up here," he says, grudging. "Knife cut piggin' strings layin' around. An' here's a dead horse. Hmm. What do you know? It's a Rafter L, belongin' to Joe Lanning—next ranch south of Sandy's. Sa-a-ay, you don't reckon he coulda had Joe an' some of his boys tied here?"

"No," I yelp.

"Then howcome this Rafter L carcass here?"

"I rode it, that's howcome. Them rustlers downed my horse back on the Madison. I walked to Sandy's an', findin' no broncs, walked to Rafter L. Nobody was home, so I helped myself an' taken after Sandy's stock."

"I don't think we need to hear any more," says Pete, cold. "He admits to stealin' horseflesh from the Lanning corrals. I'm convinced he's one of a gang so treacherous they were false to one another. Boys, what's your pleasure with this snake?"

"Hang him!" They yell it, all together.

"No use delayin' any longer," yells Jimmer, an' he starts his rope a-twirlin'.

"Wait!" I cry, desperate, knowin' I'm on the crumblin' brink of eternity. These men are friends but they don't know it an' I can't find the way to convince 'em. It whittles me down to my last white chip. "Look!" I holler, levelin' my arm, pointin'. "There's them three rustlers now—tryin' to sneak around us!"

Jimmer lets his rope sag. Every one of 'em twists in his saddle, starin' into the fretted moon shadows. I sag to the pony's barrel an' roll my spurs. The critter leaps like he's shot from a gun, straight into a patch of underbrush. Behind me lifts a cry of rage an' the deadly yammer of guns. Bullets whine through the brush, all missin'—I hope. Brush is whippin' me. The frightened horse is bumpin' trees, bouncin' off an' somehow keepin' his feet. I'm encouraged that, with a little ground between us, I can outrun them jaspers. I raise up for a look ahead, to determine the best way to go to keep brush an' trees between us, when—*bam!* I get it, an' good. A level limb takes me across the forehead, liftin' me out of my leather an' dumpin' me in deep brush.

All but out cold, I lie there, listenin' to them six cussin' buckaroos slash past me. Tired an' battered an' beaten, I coulda stayed right there for three-four days, ketchin' up on my sleep. But life's sweet even to a feller out on his feet. Somehow I drag myself off that line of travel, crawl into the center of a stickery bush an' lie doggo, shiverin' some as Pete an' his men roar past on the trail of my horse.

Slowly, I begin to come out of the fog, dabbin' at my cut brow, listenin' to the cussin' of them disappointed manhunters when they find the saddle empty. Pete's voice comes to me. "Hell, no. Why waste time lookin' for a needle in a haystack? We was asleep an' he tricked us. Let him go. Come on, let's get back to them ponies."

SOUNDS of them fade away an' I take inventory, as the feller said. My mistake was in thinkin' Jonesy was the third an' last of them renegades. I was talkin' about three rustlers an' Jimmer mentioned four. The one that nearly tallied me must have been guarding the ponies. Jonesy came along later, following the trail, an' cut his pards loose. Of course. Where were they now? With only one pony between them, their first need would be mounts. An' where would they find 'em nearer than Sandy's herd, a couple of miles away? They've done one murder for those broncs an' I don't reckon they'd squeam any at a few more. Cripes!

I climb onto my legs, stagger some an' take out to'rds Sandy's. Thirty years ago this very trail ran blood when Henry Plummer's boys were on the loose. Looks like somebody's forgettin' what happened to them hellbenders, then.

It's downhill an' I make time, knowin' the only chance them four rustlers have is to surprise an' overpower them boys guardin' the ponies, before Pete an' the others get back. Which will be something to brag about if they do it, with only one gun an' one horse. I've covered a mile an' a half when the shootin' breaks out like a young war.

I break into a run, my only hope to get there while the battle's still undecided. But who's fightin'? Is it Pete's whole outfit against one rustler gun? Or did the rustlers manage to get the guns of the

horse guards an'—I stop thinkin' fast.

Speculation's kicked right out of my mind by the sudden rattle of hoofbeats. Lookin' through the trees, I see the pony comin' like an express train, its rider lyin' along the withers, hangin' onto the horn like grim death to a corp'. Plainly wounded an' helpless. It means a horse, half my need, an' if I'm lucky . . . a gun. I step off the trail an', as the pony flashes past, hurl myself at the bridle. The badly scairt brute drags me a couple rods before I get him under control. The rider plops into the trail an' lays still. He's dead when I lead the pony back to him. An' I take about a second to consider the strange ways of life an' death. This is the feller that was in such a sweat to turn me into cottonwood fruit, back yonder. A half hour ago, he was rearin' for my blood. Now he don't bat an eye as I ram his .45 into my empty holster an' climb into his saddle, where there's a .30-30 carbine under the fender.

Down the line, the firin's stopped an' I waste no time headin' down there. I'm a fool an' I know it. If I had an ounce uh brains, I'd ride yonderly. No matter who's drawed the winnin' down there, they'll welcome me with lead. I can't hardly think of one good reason why I should chance it, yet here I am wearin' out spurs gettin' into the heart uh trouble.

The ruckus has been settled in the woody glen where Pete told half his men to stay with the rustled stock. I approach it cautious, what few sounds my horse makes drowned by the hard voices of men. The moment I hear words, I know what's happened an' how. Pete is cussin' them rustlers, wild an' bitter.

"You double-damned, side-windin' sons uh dogs," he rages. "Except for a lucky shot that clipped my coco, I'd uh took two of you snakes with me. Damn my eyes, I thought when that slim complected pard of yours give us the slip, we was gettin' about as bad as they come. But when four half-baked gazebos overcome twelve weary willies on horseback, killin's too good for said awful tired horsebackers."

"Not at all, feller." The big Jonesy hombre grins down at the line of buckaroos lyin' there, two dead, several wounded an' the rest tied tight. "Killin' may be too good for you, but we're generous. We'll kill you, dump your carcasses into yonder dry gulch an' head for a scope uh country where the weather better fits our clothes. But that gent you say gave you the slip—he's no pard of ours. I done some bad shootin' on the Madison, killed his pony an' give him a life. He must uh wanted them ponies bad, 'cause he taken the trail, surprised the boys who thought he was me, shot 'em an' tied 'em up. Lucky I came along to loose 'em an' lead 'em back."

"He tried to tell us he wasn't one of you," moans Pete Cartright. "We should have listened. Jimmer, you steered us wrong."

"Go to hell!" snaps that tough kid.

JONESY chortles. "Don't use up your last minutes fightin', boys." He pulls out his long-barreled cutter. "I reckon bullets is the cheapest an' easiest way uh puttin' 'em outo their misery, eh fellers?"

"I don't like it," grumbles one, with a dirty bandanna knotted around a scalp wound. "That killin' down yonder, folks

would thank us for that. But killin' all these possemen, we'll be hounded an' ketched if it takes 'em a year. I say tie 'em up an' leave 'em."

"Nonsense." Jonesy's eyes glitter cruel. "You boys are gettin' soft. We can't leave these buckaroos alive to put the deadwood on us if an' when we're ketched. I'll do the job myself; watch an' learn something, then we'll hunt down that horseless, gunless Jones gent an' hang him up by the heels to die slow. . . ." He points his gun at Pete, who closes his eyes. I pour the spurs to my bronc, jump him straight at Jonesy.

"Don't think you'll make a hand of this riffle," I yell, an' my gun's spittin' at that snake.

Jonesy whirls, his face stiff with astonishment, his gun coming around. A splash of fire explodes at me. I'm jerkin' the prong of the cedar-butted gun I highgraded up the trail. As if in a nightmare, I see Jonesy wilt down in a heap, his stubbled face horribly contorted, a dark hole between his staring eyes.

My pony, mad with fright, rushes over him, me fightin' his hard-held bit. The other three, for the second time tonight, are shootin' at me. I'm shootin' back an' one goes down, raging. A bullet burns my mount an' I'm off balance, unready. He pitches an' I join the birds, flyin' for a loopin' fall. I come up, reckless an' full uh fight. I waste a bullet as the rustler I just downed heaves his arms about me an' pulls me to earth. I rip open his scalp with a swingin' gun barrel, knocking him kicking.

A bullet kicks dirt into my face, half blindin' me. I fire at a shadowy figure, drivin' a slug through the neck of the wounded rustler with the bandanna around his head. He shrieks, turned, springs mebby twenty-five yards an' tumbles. My brain seems to explode an' I know I'm fallin' into a bottomless pit. My forehead bangs against the ground an' I'm jarred out of it for a split second.

The day is breaking an' there stands the last of the rustlers—the one that just shot me, feet planted wide, wounded right arm stuck into his coat front, his left hand pointin' a smokin' six-shooter at me. Pete is bawlin' for me to roll from the shot, but he's overestimatin' my powers. I can't roll, but habit is strong in my right arm an' I shoot—without my brain orderin' it. That rustler throws his arms wide an' screams shrill as he plunges to earth. Then I fall asleep.

I wake up with the thunder of hoofbeats in my ears an' a heavy, commanding voice expressing puzzlement. "The quick is tied an' the dead is plentiful. Whatever from hell took place here?"

An' Pete Cartright answering him. "Sheriff, are we glad to see you. Shuck the ropes off us, will yuh, before gangrene sets in. It's a long story an' you'll get it, but to make it short an' sweet, that feller lyin' yonder saved us from murderin' renegades, four-five hour ago, an' give his life doin' so—"

"If I ain't mistaken," says the gent Pete calls sheriff, "that man ain't dead. I see him moving. Who is he?"

"Said his name was Jones," pipes up Jimmer, the Kid. "Hi there, boss! He said he was a friend of yours."

"Of mine?" comes Sandy Sims' whiskey voice. "Gimme a look at him."

That wakes me up sudden, the old fear on me. I sit up, blinkin'. The sun's high an' warm. The grassy glen's swarmin' with horsebackers an' I need only one glance to know who they are. Rick Ransom an' his tough, bearded, stubborn posse from Park County. Some have lit down to cut Pete an' his men loose. Sandy, with stringy Forty Miler behind him, is dismountin', starin' at me.

"Cripes," he growls. "The man's face is too bloody to tell. . . ."

"Sa-a-ay," yelps Forty Miler, "that's —"

"Insomnia Jones," I bust in. "You boys remember me. The feller that's got a long ways to go to ketch up with his sleep."

They look at one another an' Sandy mutters. "Sure enough. Insomnia Jones." He kneels, spongin' blood that's seeped across my face from a creased scalp, mutterin' in his beard. "Easy does it, pardner. Fer God's sake, don't tell 'em them ponies come out of my corral. I didn't know that feller, Simson, wasn't what he claimed—a horse breeder from over Point of Rocks way. You keep my secret an' me an' Forty Miler, we never heard of Tensleep Maxon. This gent is sheriff of Park County."

"Do tell," I murmur. "It's a deal, Sandy. You know me; I never was much but ignorant."

He pats my cheek an' stands up. "He's Jones, all right," he tells 'em, "an' a good friend uh mine. He's shot up some an' I'll take him home for patchin'. How about a horse for him to straddle, Sheriff?"

"Why not?" grins Ransom. "Seein' I wouldn't have none of the critters except for him stoppin' Wildhorse Harry Simson's rustlers, he can have his pick of the herd, an' a bill-of-sale with him. If he'd just been lucky enough to get Wildhorse, who I run all the way over here from Park County—"

I grin as Forty Miler cripples over to warn Jimmer against sayin' anything incriminating. It encourages me to try my legs an' do a mite of false pretensin'. "The great Wildhorse," I say, actin' proud, "is layin' dead in Sandy's barn, where I come face to face with him. . . ."

It stuns 'em for a few seconds. Then Rick Ransom gives a yell an' grabs for my hand. "Good work, Jones. Mighty good goin'. That skunk's been devilin' Park County horse outfits for several years, me hardest hit of all. If this information proves to be true, you got a ten thousand reward comin' an' I got a blue ribbon gelding out home that you'll never need to apologize for. Thanks a million, boy."

Only Jimmer is sober in that happy, hand-shakin' crowd. The Kid just stares at me, as if marvelin' how a man can tell such a whopper. But really I told nothin' but the truth. We all ride down to Sandy's, where the dead man's identified as Wildhorse Harry. An' that's howcome me to spend four carefree months, no sheriffs to devil me, ten thousand dollars in my jeans an' Cinnabar in pasture—gift from the sheriff of Park County an' about as much horse as ever come rolled in one hide. Worthy successor of Hassan, an' that's praise in any lingo. Four months playin' a purposely lousy brand of seven-up, so Sandy an' Forty Miler can win back some of the loss they taken by doing business with that swindlin' Wildhorse Harry. It's good to have friends.

GUTS DON'T COME FREE!

By
L. L. FOREMAN

RUSS eased out of the house by way of the kitchen door and hurried across the ranchyard, hoping his father wouldn't see him. In the barn he buckled on the gun belt he had carried wrapped up in his coat. He set the hang of the holster as his brothers, Lloyd and

The bear snarled and came at him. Russ fired four times

If the Kid showed yellow when he fired a gun for fun, what colors would he show when commanded to kill the only thing he loved?

Emerson, had showed him, and headed for the arroyo. Single-rig, the cinnamon bear with the brown stripe around its middle, ambled along after him as a matter of course.

"Guess I shoulda put your collar an' chain on, Single," Russ told the bear. "The Old Man said to do it."

The bear twitched a patch of furry hide and muscle. It might have been a shrug. It might have meant, Shucks, you know I don't need any collar and chin. All I've done lately was snap at the Old Man when he ran me out of the kitchen.

That was how Russ interpreted it. He and Single-rig understood each other pretty well.

The Old Man was Russ's father, Max Fortune. He had given warning that it was a mistake, the day Lloyd and Emerson took the clumsy little cub from one of Herb Stout's traps and brought it home for Russ. Cubs became bears. A tame bear was a dangerous nuisance and could turn as mean as a wild one.

But it was right after Russ' accident, and the two older brothers were sort of paying Russ particular atention. They agreed that the kid shouldn't have been fooling with that rusty old cap-and-ball pistol. Still, you couldn't keep a Fortune away from guns, and they guessed they hadn't done anything to discourage him, letting him handle theirs and teaching him how to shoot.

The powder had worked loose in the old cap-and-ball five shot, and when Russ fired the side-flash set off all five loads. The explosion wrecked the pistol. Pretty nearly made a wreck of Russ, too.

His right hand was all right now, except for a little stiffness that was wearing off. And he was recovering the sight of his right eye. The mistiness was nothing like what it had been. It was gradually clearing. Meantime, before they went away, Lloyd and Emerson had taught him to hold a gun in his left hand and sight it with his left eye.

Russ seated himself on the bank of the arroyo, and Single-rig came and sat solemnly beside him. Ordinarily, the comic gravity of the bear was good for a grin. Not now, though. "Quit leanin' on me," Russ said. His nerves were taut. Determination remained steady, as it had before, but already his eyelids were quivering.

He drew the gun from its holster. It was loaded, he knew, but he checked it to make sure. "This time I'll do it!" he said aloud, to convince himself. "This time . . ."

He took aim at a white pebble along the arroyo, sighting the gun with his left eye. His forefinger tightened on the trigger.

"This time . . ."

The instinctive flinch beat him again. His head jerked back, eyes shut.

He lowered the unfired gun, and sat still. After a while he slowly shoved it back into the holster. He rested his elbows on his knees and put his head into his cupped hands. "It's no use. No use trying any more." His voice was harsh in his dry throat.

Single-rig made rumbling sounds that might have been grunts of sympathy. Russ wished to think so. Nobody else offered that much nowadays, anyhow. Without raising his head he reached out and tugged and rubbed the loose fur under the bear's ear. Single-rig yawned pleasedly and leaned against him, a trick he'd kept from cub days.

Max Fortune claimed that Single-rig was too dumb to know he was a grown bear now. Russ knew better. Single was smart enough not to lean all his weight on a fellow. He could still be wrestled with and not leave a scratch as long as you didn't get him excited, although of course it was always best to wear the padded canvas jacket and heavy leather chaps. He was still an amiable clown most of the time, except when the collar and chain were put on him. He hated that collar like he hated dogs—particularly Herb Stout's dogs, and Herb, to, for that matter.

That wasn't so dumb, either.

RUSS got up at last and started listlessly back to the house, the unfired gun a mocking heaviness at his waist. Single-rig followed, sniffing inquisitively at everything as if he hadn't already given the route to the arroyo and back a thorough sniffing fifty times over during the past few weeks.

Max Fortune, stamping up toward the house, pinned a frosty stare on his young-

est son. It was some time since the Old Man had handed in his badge, but thirty years as a lawman had put a sharp edge on him that would never be blunted.

He said, "Seein' I'm due in town by noon, I should think you could've got the buckboard ready for me! Or have you forgotten," he queried with biting sarcasm, "that Lloyd an' Emerson are comin' home today?"

Russ hadn't forgotten. He only wished they weren't coming.

United States Marshal Lloyd Fortune and Ranger Captain Emerson Fortune had met while on the trail of the notorious Griffin gang. They had smoked the Griffins to a finish, and now they were coming home together for a visit and a rest. The whole county thought mightly highly of them. Worthy sons of a famous fighting lawman. Brothers to be proud of.

But what, Russ wondered drearily, would Lloyd and Emerson think of their no-account kid brother?

The answer to that was foreshadowed in the eyes of the Old Man. Russ saw the frosty stare drop to the gun belt, and he knew that the Old Man was thinking of that lion hunt weeks ago.

They had set out, he and the Old Man, with Herb Stout, to clean up the mountain lions that were preying on the new calves. In the foothills Herb's dogs treed a husky male, and the Old Man gave Russ the nod. Russ had been getting in a lot of practice, dry-shooting with empty shells in the six-shooter that Lloyd had sent him for his birthday. He'd made a brag or two about what he'd bet he could do when he got around to using live shells.

The mountain lion lay crouched on a limb, clearly outlined, its tail lashing. Russ drew his gun. He cocked it, sighted it, began squeezing the trigger—and stalled, because suddenly all he could think of was the terrific back-flash of that old cap-and-ball pistol, his bloodied right hand and blinded eye. His head jerked back, his eyes flinched shut, and while the two men stared at him he lowered the gun and mumbled, "I—I—I got something in my eye!"

"Sho' 'nuff?" remarked Herb Stout, and brought the lion down with one shot. He spread the story, relishing it, adding to it. The red-blooded Fortunes had a white-livered whelp! A yellow-belly!

Everything had gone wrong since then for Russ. Nothing was worth doing. He was no longer friends with the Old Man, and he had an urge to avoid meeting anybody. The only one who didn't send him curious glances was Single-rig, who didn't understand about the matter.

Max Fortune compressed his stern mouth, irritated by what he regarded as sullenly defiant silence. He failed to perceive the misery beneath the wooden mask. "Told you to put the chain on that bear, didn't I? Why can't you do as I say? Why can't you do anything right?"

Russ could find nothing to say. There had been a time when he could have talked things over with the Old Man, easily and naturally, and found patient advice and understanding. It was all different now. It would be a lot worse, he guessed, after Lloyd and Emerson got here. When they learned of how matters stood, they'd carefully refrain from any mention of guns and hunting and dangerous scrapes. He'd be ill-at-ease, more lonely than ever, an alien in his own family. He just wouldn't belong. And they had expected so much of him.

THE Old Man said curtly, "Try an' get dinner started while I'm gone, an' clean up the house some. There'll be six of us to feed. Cal Mason's comin' to work on those colts, an' I've hired Herb Stout to mend fence."

Russ flushed dully. Mending fence was one of his jobs, but he had neglected it. And it had been agreed that he was to have worked on the colts. The Old Man had evidently decided that the breaking corral was no place for a youngster who couldn't keep his nerve.

"Herb Stout better keep his dogs away from Single, if he brings 'em," Russ muttered.

"You chain up that bear!"

"Yes, sir. But Herb Stout pitches rocks at him when he thinks nobody's lookin', an' sets his dogs on him. That's why Single hates the chain. Makes him mean."

The Old Man's nose pinched in. "If he's goin' mean, he'll have to be shot! Chain him in the barn an' shut him in."

"But he hates—"

"Who's runnin' this outfit—me or that

bear?" The Old Man's temper was slipping. "Do as I say, you hear?"

"Yes, sir. Come on, Single."

Single-rig, when he spied the heavy collar and chain, sidled off, grunting. "Hey, now!" Russ coaxed him, throwing an arm over the great shaggy neck. "Don't you pull that on me, feller! I wouldn't do this if I didn't have to, you know that. Be a pal, now, an' quit growlin' at me." He fastened the collar on and snapped the chain to an overheard cross-beam.

The bear tried another tack. He made sounds deep in his throat that were complaining and plaintive. He nuzzled Russ' foot, hugging it gently between his huge paws like a pup. He lumbered onto his hind legs, forepaws dangling, and wagged his head. He went through all the foolish tricks of his cub days, clowning to please, trying hard to beg off from what he thought was punishment for some forgotten misdeed.

"You big lummox," Russ muttered, scrubbing the short, rough nose with his hand. "Now behave y'self, hear? Don't you get mean, like you did last time, an' bust up everything in reach. The Old Man don't know about that yet. I doubt if I could cover up for you a second time."

He took off his gun belt, threw it behind a pile of empty feed sacks in a corner, and left quickly. He never wanted to see that gun again, or any other, and Single's pleading antics were getting under his skin. The bear growled as the door slammed shut, and rattled the chain peevishly.

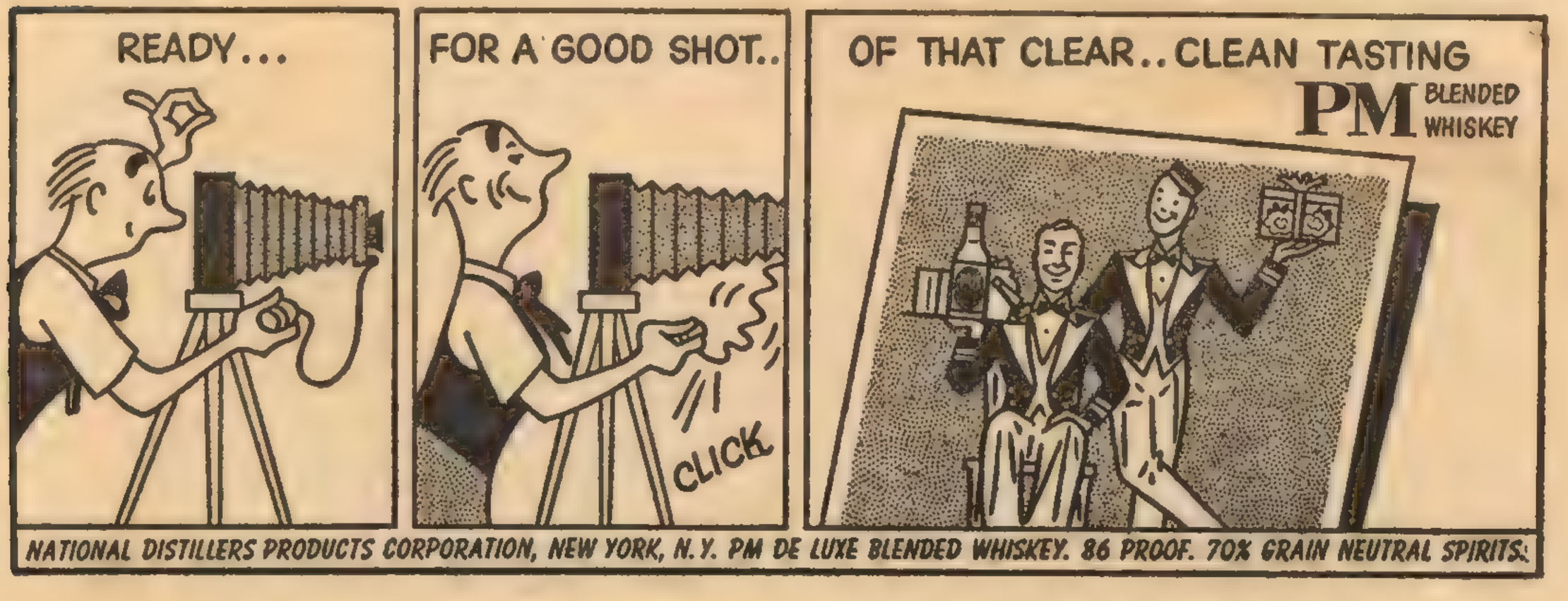
Sweeping out the house, Russ paused to listen to the Old Man leaving in the buckboard. He leaned on the broom, his shoulders hunched, and considered all the chores ahead. House chores. Woman's chores. Well, that was about all he was good for, and none too good at that. And meantime the Old Man, full of pride, would be meeting Lloyd and Emerson at the station, showing them off to everybody in town, bringing them home, breaking out a specially saved bottle in their honor. Sooner or later there'd come a question. The Old Man would change the subject, but it would all come out in due course.

"There he stood with his shooter shakin' an' his eyelids clamped tight!" That would be Herb Stout, secretly glad to get in a sly jab at the fighting Fortunes. "Like an ol' maid comin' on a burglar in the dark! Haw! Skeered stiff by that lion—an' it way off up the tree! You fellers better feed him gunpowder an' raw meat, like I do my dawgs!"

AROUND one o'clock Cal Mason showed up with Herb Stout. Russ liked the quiet-spoken horse-breaker. Cal was always patient with horses, even the bad ones, and everybody thought well of him and his work.

Herb Stout, in Russ's opinion, wasn't half the man Cal was, for all his hunting record. Herb looked and talked tough, and hunted like somebody carrying a relentless grudge against all animals, but alongside Cal Mason he shaped up kind of scraggly and second-rate. When not hunting he was open to take on any odd job offered him.

As usual, Herb had his dogs with him, two massive brutes of nondescript breed who right away began snuffling at the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barn door. Herb left them outside, came clumping through the house after Cal Mason, and helped himself to hot coffee from the stove.

"Been on any lion hunts lately?" he asked Russ, and winked at Cal, who looked blank and said nothing. They finished their coffee and went outside.

Alone and busy in the kitchen, Russ followed his thoughts back to Lloyd and Emerson. Maybe if he acted calm and natural, like Cal Mason, it wouldn't be so bad. Wrestle with Single, and then dare them to do it. Maybe they'd have forgotten how by now, and get tossed, and good old Single would stand swaying and grunting, grinning that happy, foolish grin of his.

A noise reached him from outside. It was the barn door. He heard it creak and bang wide open. He darted through the house to the front, saw Herb Stout entering the barn, and yelled, "Hey, keep out o' there!"

Herb Stout frowned back at him, and called out something about wire-cutters. He never had any tools of his own, always had to borrow them, and seldom remembered to return them. He went on into the barn, his two curs rushing in ahead of him, and suddenly there was a snarling growl, a yelp, and a startled oath. The chain rattled. The growl sounded again, and the man's oath changed abruptly to a shout of fear.

Russ raced to the barn on the heels of Cal Mason, who had been sitting on the front porch awaiting the arrival of the Fortunes from town. Cal got there first. He looked in through the open door, and turned back. "Hang on till I get my gun, Herb! Stay out o' there, Russ!" He sprinted toward the corral, where he had left his saddle and warbag on the top bar.

Russ plunged on into the barn, his heart pounding in his throat, Herb Stout's frantic shouting in his ears. It cost a moment to see clearly, in the shadow after sunlight. He could never get used to the mistiness in his right eye, and always expected it to focus with the left.

What he saw first was the broken length of chain swinging from the overheard crossbeam. The chain had been strong enough to hold Single-rig when he was a cub. It wasn't enough to hold an enraged bear. Russ started forward, and nearly fell over the body of a dead dog.

The other dog was hanging onto Single-rig, its fangs in the bear's rump. The bear twisted, slapped at it like a man smacking at a bothersome deer-fly. The dog's broken corpse hurtled across the barn and lay still.

"Single! Single—down!"

For the first and only time Single seemed not to hear him, not even to know him. Russ jumped at him, grappled with him. Single was reared up on his hind legs, clawing at Herb Stout, growling, snapping. Herb Stout had somehow leaped and got hold of a cross-beam. He was trying desperately to pull himself up out of the bear's reach. His clothes were ripped down one side. Blood showed on his naked skin, and he was gasping, sobbing.

"Single!" They rolled on the dirt floor. "Single! Down, pal—down!" Russ was sobbing like Herb Stout. He clutched the bear around the brown stripe, and butted him with his head. It was the secret wrestling trick, the signal, the old trick that had never failed. Single had always given up then, grinning, tolerant, red tongue lolling.

THE bear twisted again, as he had against the dog. His small eyes blazed savagely. His growl was the worst sound that Russ had ever heard.

"Single! Listen, boy!" Russ gasped, hanging on. "Drop an' run, Herb—quick! He's gone bad!"

Herb Stout dropped, unable to hold on any longer, but he didn't run. He sank to his knees, his mouth agape, and keeled over.

The bear uttered a coughing roar. Some unconscious recollection must have caused him to keep his semi-retractile claws bedded, even in his berserk fury, when he struck at Russ. But he struck hard.

Russ landed against the wall of the barn. "Single!" he sobbed whisperingly, the breath knocked out of him. "Hold it, pal—hold it! Single!"

The bear, growling constantly, turned to the hated man shivering on the floor Herb Stout screamed, tried to crawl away, and more cloth ripped under the slash of claws.

Russ made it on his knees to the pile

of empty feed sacks. He felt for the gun. His hand closed over the hard butt. His left eye cleared, steadied. It had to, without any flinching, and he lined up the gun's sights, and fired.

The bear snarled, whirled around, and came at him. Russ fired again. He fired four times. . . .

* * *

Later he was aware of noises outside the barn. He didn't raise his head. It was buried in rough fur, and he was whispering, "Sorry, pal. You know I wouldn't have done it if I didn't have to. Sorry, pal. I had to do it. I had to."

They were at the open barn door, outlined against the strong sunshine outside: the Old Man, Lloyd and Emerson. Lloyd said, "'Lo, Russ. We met Cal Mason taking Herb Stout in to the doctor. He told us what happened. Russ! Hear me?"

Russ didn't answer. He took the collar and chain off Single-rig, gently. He threw them the length of the barn. They never should have been put on, he thought. Made Single mean. Good old Single, he never would have hit him like that, only he lost his temper, the way folks did. Damn folks. They didn't understand.

"Russ," said the Old Man in a queer, strangled voice. "Russ. Listen. Lloyd's talkin' to you."

Lloyd said, "Jim Griffin. We shared grub and blankets, only three years ago. But he went bad. Had to go after him."

"Come on to the house, Russ," Emerson said soberly. "We'll bury him for you. Anywhere you say. It's hell, Russ. We know. But you got to do what you got to do. Come on, feller. . . ."

Sitting that night on his bed, Russ couldn't help hearing the talk in the main room. "Four shots you could cover with a card," Cal Mason said. "An' that bear comin' right at him. I saw it. Nerve? Took more'n that. He thought a lot o' that bear. They were pals. You don't know that boy."

"The bear had to go," rumbled the Old Man. "Couldn't turn it loose. Too tame. Be a crime. Couldn't keep it. Gettin' to be too much bear. *I* couldn't shoot it, though. Not me. H'm. Herb Stout, he'll sure shut down. He sure was a sick chicken!"

Russ walked in on them. "Hi, fellers," he said.

"Hi," said Lloyd. He passed the makings over. "We're chewing the rag here. Sit in, huh?"

Russ built a cigarette and got a light from the Old Man. Tomorrow he'd put up some kind of stone over old Single's grave in the yard. They'd all help, and they wouldn't grin. They all knew how it was, how you felt, after you had to gun down a pal who had gone bad.

The loneliness was all gone. He was sitting among his own folks, listening to talk about guns and hunting and dangerous scrapes. "I don't figure to stay up too late," he told the Old Man. "Got a big day comin' up tomorrow. That fence, it's in a hell of a shape."

. . LAST OF THE

By

ROE RICHMOND

I SAT on the veranda of the Bellevue Hotel in Canasaw and stared at my boots on the rail. They were almost worn through where the stirrup irons rubbed. We were in a low financial state and doing nothing to uplift it. I was getting to be a fixture on that porch. I had looked at the main street until I saw it whenever I closed my eyes. It wasn't that pretty either. I never minded loafing when I had money in my pockets, but it's another thing when you can't afford to drink or gamble or do anything but sit.

Today I'd been thinking about the things I'd done wrong in my life. By now I had used up the pleasanter things, the

Severin was deadly fast with guns, but so were his proud ex-saddlemates—for whose honest stars he bid fifty thousand traitor dollars!

friends and fights and women and good times. Looking back it seemed as if I never had done anything just right in all my thirty years. I'd been an ornery kid, a hell-raising boy, and even worse as a grown man. I had always been against everybody and everything. Against my folks, school teachers, employers, and finally against law and order. I felt bad about it, but there wasn't much I could do to change it now. It might have been different if the Sugrues hadn't killed the old man and burned our layout and run off our herd. But maybe it wouldn't have either. If you're a wrong one you're that, no matter what happens. And I guess I was a wrong one from way back.

Reaching for my shirt pocket I remembered I was out of tobacco. I had a plug left and I bit off a chew, but it burned me to be out of smoking tobacco. This whole deal in Canasaw was going bad, and I was getting mighty sick of it. If Severin didn't make a play pretty soon I was going to call him. Maybe he was the brains and the front, but he couldn't push Borich and me around forever. He needed us as much as we did him, and maybe more. I tried to spit as far as the board sidewalk but was short a foot, the same as yesterday. I was getting so disgusted I couldn't even spit good.

Not that Severin was a bad boy. We always got along fine, the three of us. But Sev was so damn good-looking he was always getting roped in by some female. We had come here to take that adobe brick bank across the way, and ended up with Severin taking out the banker's daughter while Bo and I wore out our pants waiting. We weren't jealous, we were just going crazy doing nothing. What money we had left Sev was spending on this Kay Morley. He claimed it was a good investment, but Bo and I were beginning to wonder. We had taken a lot of banks before without stopping to make love.

We knew we'd get it back all right, but that didn't help us kill all this time in a strange town with empty pokes. Severin was fair enough about money. He said this one would go for a hundred thousand anyway, being in a rich cattle country, and we would take thirty apiece and put the other ten to expenses, clothes, and equipment, and a good jamboree in St. Louis or maybe Chicago. He planned and fronted all the jobs and he could have claimed forty to our thirty, but Severin never figured it that way. We had no kick on Sevvy except for his weakness for women. But perhaps if Bo and I had been as pretty as Severin we'd have been weak that way, too.

I GOT a stream of tobacco juice within six inches of the slats when Borich came back from looking our horses over

FIGHTING SUGRUES

at the corral. Bo was built broad and solid, about as strong as any man I ever saw but not muscle-bound at all, just full of quick free-flowing power. In a rough-house fight Bo could generally handle two or three average tough men. He had thick black hair, burning black eyes, and a square scarred face, solemn and ugly in a pleasant way. In a tight spot Borich was a great man to have beside you.

"Where's Sev?" he asked.

"Where is he all the time?" I said, cutting loose a squirt of tobacco that splashed the edge of the plank walk.

"I had enough of this, Flagg," said Borich. "I'm a patient man too, but Sev's stringin' this out way too long."

"No point in it either," I said. "The girl ain't goin' to marry him after he stands up the old man's bank."

"Maybe he ain't goin' to stand it up, Flagg."

"He never crossed us yet, Bo."

"He never had a girl like this one be-

Sugar Sugrue came through the doorway, guns blazing in both hands

fore," Borich said gently. "No tellin' what a woman like this'll lead a man to, Flagg."

"Well, we better brace him tonight, Bo," I said. "I'm gettin' morbid layin' around like this."

"It ain't good for a man," agreed Borich. "We get slow and soft and stale we're liable to get blowed down by some third-rate tinhorn. It's happened to good men before."

I nodded. I knew it was true, I had seen it happen . . . You have to keep your hand in. I was practicing my draw every morning in front of the mirror upstairs, but it isn't the same. In our outfit Severin was the brains, Borich the strong-arm boy, and I was the gun hand. The other two were fast with guns too, and all of us could fight barehanded if we had to, but sixguns were my specialty. I had handled them since I was a kid, when Dad gave me an old Paterson Colt .36 and showed me how to use it. I could throw a .44 with any of them, right or left-handed.

I was only wearing one gun in town. Severin said it looked better and he was right, of course, but I didn't like it. You never know when you're going to need that extra iron. The left-hand gun had saved my life more than a few times. Some sharpers always shoot for your right side, and if they get the drop your right wing is apt to be crippled. If you can come up with the left then it's plumb discouraging to the other party, it sure takes the starch out of them. I always packed two Colts when we were making a play.

Sheriff Nickerson strolled up the street and stopped in front of the veranda, eyeing us with a cool blue stare. He was a long gaunt graying man with a snuff-stained gray mustache, his face worn and haggard, his manner kind of worried and strained. He had his own ideas about us, but we hadn't given him anything to get his teeth into—yet.

"Still around, I see," Nickerson said, his voice neutral.

"Any objections?" I said, ugly from being idle so long.

"Why, no, none whatever. You plannin' on settlin' hereabouts?"

"We ain't sunk that low yet," said Borich. It was poor policy to aggravate the law, but we were both feeling mean and those stars always annoyed us considerable. For some reason most men think they have to throw their weight around as soon as they get a badge pinned on them. And the badge seems to give them a lot more weight, at least in their own estimation.

"Well, Canasaw'll maybe get along without you boys," Nickerson said.

"I hope so," I said. Then I figured he might buy us a drink or two if we were nice and friendly. "It's a good town, Sheriff. We kind of like it here."

"Thanks," Nickerson said dryly, and sauntered on, apparently not a drink-buying officer.

I SPAT over the rail and this time it carried to the slat walk. Satisfied, I stood up, said, "Let's go up and shave, Bo. Somethin' to do anyway." We got some hot water from the kitchen and carried it up to the adjoining rooms on the second floor, front corner.

"Go ahead, Flagg," said Borich, stretching out on a bed. "I'm gettin' so lazy I even hate to shave."

I stripped down to the waist and went to work in front of that bleary wavering mirror. I was homely enough without being disfigured by that cheap glass. I looked at my lean lank body and my long hollow-cheeked face, cold-eyed, bitter-mouthed, jawbones and cheekbones jutting out. I swore and shook my head. No banker's daughters would bother me much, at any rate.

Severin came in as I finished washing and grabbed a towel. He was smiling as usual, handsome and debonair, a tall lithe graceful boy with a fine blond head, clear merry hazel eyes, straight-cut features, and the easy poised assurance of a gentleman. You couldn't blame Kay Morley and the other girls. He was a fighter too, fast with an explosive strength that had surprised many larger, stronger men. Sev was good with his hands as well as guns. I had seen him enough times to know. He was a lot tougher than he looked.

"Sevvy, we're gettin' fed up," I said through the towel.

"I don't blame you," Severin said. "But it won't be much longer."

"It better not," said Borich. "What's the trouble with tomorrow? Or, if you've

got the keys, we'll pull the job tonight."

Severin laughed, a pleasant musical laugh. "No keys, Bo. But I've got a plan."

"I should hope so by this time," I said. "Spring it, Sev."

"Somebody else is goin' to rob this bank for us," he said.

"Then we take them, you mean?" I said.

"Yeah, we take them," Severin said slowly.

Borich sat up on the edge of the bed. "That's all right, Sev."

"But we don't take the money," Severin went on soberly.

I threw the towel at the wall. "What the hell you talkin' about? We don't take the money! What've we been hangin' around here for?"

"He's making a joke, Flagg," Borich muttered hopefully.

"No joke," Severin said. "There's a reward out for these men."

Borich stood up at that. "Reward, hell! A thousand dollars maybe. We came here after a hundred thousand."

"There's fifteen on them," said Severin.

"What's fifteen?" Borich demanded. "What's five apiece compared to thirty?"

"Sevvy, I'm surprised," I said. "Ain't you hero enough to that girl without a stunt like this?"

"This was goin' to be our last big deal," said Borich. "This was goin' to set us up to go straight."

"There's other banks with a hundred thousand—and more," Severin said. It was plain to see he was dead-serious, his mind was set.

"I don't like it, Sev," said Borich gruffly.

"Me neither," I said. "Not whatever, Sevvy."

"It'll set us with the law, square and solid. Nickerson knows we're wanted somewhere. Any day now he might find out where. They've had us on the run a long time now, boys. This'd cool 'em off, give us a breathin' space."

"Our luck ain't goin' to hold forever," Borich said. "I want to do this one job and pull out for good. I'm tired of bein' a damn hare!"

"Our luck's runnin' thin right now," Severin said. "That's why I'm callin' the play this way."

I shook my head. "That ain't good enough, Sevvy."

His eyes blazed straight at me, jade green now. "All right, Flagg. I've got somethin' that's good enough. You know who we're goin' to hit?"

"No," I said, but I had a quick hunch then. There was nothing else that could make Severin so sure of me, and he was awful sure.

"The Sugrue boys!"

I tried to keep my face expressionless and my voice even. "Well, we could still take the money."

"Not the way I've got it figured, Flagg," said Severin. "But we'll argue that later. You want to go against the Sugrues, don't you?"

My lips were so tight the teeth cut into them, and I didn't care any more what showed in my face and eyes. "Well, I've been waitin' thirteen years for the chance to come," I said.

OLD Mortimer Morley had tried to dress his bank up like one in the city. There was a limestone archway at

AT LAST! A DRESSING AMERICA'S BEEN WAITING FOR

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the entrance and the plateglass windows on either side were framed in limestone. A gilt lettered sign over the door said CATTLEMEN'S BANK OF CANASAW. It was a long one-story adobe across the street from the ramshackle wooden Bellevue Hotel. We had been watching that bank for two days, and even Severin was beginning to fret. This was the third morning, and it looked as if the Sugrues weren't coming.

It was funny how we'd never caught up with the Sugrues in all these years. Place after place we just missed them, they were either there ahead of us or they arrived after we left. Finally we heard they had gone to Mexico. I thought they were still south of the Rio Grande, but according to Severin they were back in the Territory and pointing for the Canasaw bank.

Thirteen years ago, when I was seventeen, we had a nice little spread on the Cherokee. This day I had gone into town with old Mulrenan to buy supplies. Late in the afternoon we were having a drink in Holbrecht's before starting home when we heard a rider pounding hell-for-leather up the street. It was one of our boys, young Lindsey, his left arm slung in a blood-soaked scarf, his mustang lathered and blowing hard. The minute I saw his face I knew something awful had happened.

"The Sugrues!" Lindsey panted. *"The Sugrues!"* That was all he could say at first. That was enough. People spoke that name the way they used to say Apaches or Cheyennes or Sioux.

I remembered dad had some kind of trouble with old Pike Sugrue. He never said much about it, but I'd been worried ever since I heard of it. The Sugrues were like a wolf-pack running wild and loose in the country. The law in those days didn't dare touch a Sugrue. If one of them had a fight the whole bunch would pitch into it. The Sugrues killed more people than smallpox. I was sick all the way out to the Cherokee.

When we got there the ranchhouse, barn, bunkhouse and sheds were burned down into charred blackened blotches of ruin, the corrals were busted and half-burnt, every horse and steer was gone. My father and Pike Sugrue were dead. Dad was all shot to pieces where they all turned loose on him after he got Pike. Riggins was dead too, Spinney and Maher wounded, and my mother was about crazy. That was the end of our ranch and it felt like the end of the world. My mother didn't live long after we moved into Broken Bow.

We tried to get up a posse—old Mully, Lindsey, Maher, Spinney and I—but nobody would go out after the Sugrues. We went out by ourselves but we never had a chance. After they killed Mulrenan from ambush we called it off. There were too many Sugrues; it was suicide to go against them at that time. They had the whole section terrorized.

After Mom died I drifted around punching cattle, riding shotgun on a stage line, guarding for a freight outfit, gambling, drinking, fighting and generally going to hell in my own sweet way. About six years ago I met up with Severin and Borich, fiddle-footed like me and with no great love for the world and its people, little respect for the law that let murderers like the Sugrues run hog-wild. We had been partners ever since, making and spending plenty of money, having a lot of fun on the way, but not really getting anywhere. We had planned on making this one big strike, moving out and setting up a ranch or some kind of business in another territory or state.

And now we were loafing around the Bellevue in Canasaw waiting for the Sugrue brothers to come in and hit the bank. There were four of them left, we understood. Sugar, a pretty boy like Severin, only Sugar was dark, a sleek, smooth, smiling man in fancy clothes, pleasant on the surface, deadly underneath. Sugar headed the outfit.

BOKE was as ugly as Sugar was handsome, short, squat and apelike with terrible long arms and shoulders like oak beams. His scowling face was enough to scare an ordinary person to death, everybody declared, and Boke had killed men with his bare hands.

Red was supposed to be as fiery as his flaming hair, an insolent, mocking devil-may-care gunman, scornful of everything on earth, reckless and fearless and tough as whipthong.

Nails, a medium-sized plain-looking man, sober and quiet, cold and hard and

merciless under his mild front, was said to be the fastest gun in the family, the most dangerous of the bunch . . . And there was a half-breed they had brought up from Mexico, Severin reported, a slick, oily man called Jourdenez, an expert with the knife.

Getting at the Sugrues meant more to me than to Sevvy and Bo, of course, but we had been close together for so long that they considered it their fight and their revenge too. Anybody that helped put the Sugrues under would be doing a great service for the country. We were outside the law too, but we never hurt or killed anybody unless we had to, while the Sugrues slaughtered for the sake of killing. Sugar, Red and Nails shot men to keep in practice with their guns, and Boke broke men up to exercise his muscles and hear them scream.

"To hell with this!" said Borich as the third morning wore away. "Let's take the damn bank ourselves and light out of this sinkhole."

"They'll come today," Severin said. "I've got a feelin', boys."

"Where'd you get the information, Sevvy?" I asked.

"Never mind, Flagg," he smiled.

"Don't tell me Miss Morley's in touch with the Sugrues?" I said, remembering that Sugar had a way with women just as Severin did. "Maybe she's got a weakness for bank robbers."

"Maybe," said Severin.

"Where we headin' after the show?" Borich wanted to know.

"I might be stayin' here," Severin admitted. "Wouldn't be surprised if Nickerson'd make me a deputy."

We both swore and stared at him. I said "Didn't think you had it that bad, kid."

"It's the real thing this time," Severin said. "I couldn't break with you boys if it wasn't."

We didn't talk any for a time then, all of us feeling bad. Severin had a perfect right to do as he liked. He was some younger than we were, he had a life to live his own way, and still we felt as if he was letting us down, running out on us, turning us in for a woman. All of a sudden we were stiff and awkward and unnatural together, like three strangers with nothing in common. I hadn't realized how much Severin meant to us, I guess. It took the night and warmth out of the sun, dulled the blue sky and the colors of the street, made the world seem cold and empty, hollow and cheerless.

With Severin gone we wouldn't have much left. He was the one who made things sparkle and glitter, put warmth and humor and life into everything we saw and did, made it all seem like a gay adventure. Bo and I didn't have those bright qualities. Without Severin it wasn't going to be fun any more. I saw the future stretch ahead, flat and dull and desolate. We wouldn't have that ranch without Sevvy. We wouldn't have anything.

We sat in the hotel lobby smoking the cigars Severin had bought and watching the bank. I had both guns on now, the holsters tied down at the bottom, and Borich was armed the same way. Severin had one gun as usual on his right leg, but he packed another in a shoulder holster under his left armpit. The waiting was getting us all down. My cigar burned short and tasted rank. I threw it away and wished I had a tumbler full of whiskey. I bit off a chew to take the sour dryness out of my mouth, and Borich reached for the plug and took one too.

Leaning back in the rockers, feet on the broad windowsill, we watched the sun climb and the dust swirl up from passing horsemen, wagons and buckboards. The noon-hour came, the sun beating down straight and hot, and the street was quiet with everybody gone to eat dinner. This was a good time to hit a bank. When we saw five riders in the alley between the bank and the general store we knew it was the Sugrues before we could make out their faces. They weren't masked but their hatbrims were pulled low. They all wore two guns and they looked plenty tough.

THEY reined up at the mouth of the alley. Sugar Sugrue stepped down and walked into the bank. In a few minutes Boke and Red trailed in after him, and Nails took his stand at the doorway. The Mexican stayed with the horses in the shade of the alley. The street was bright and empty under the glaring sunlight. Our chairs creaked as we got up, shifted and settled our gun belts, loosened

the Colts in the leather, yanked down our own hatbrims and walked toward the door.

"Ain't you goin' to eat dinner, boys?" the clerk called from the desk.

"Not right now," Severin told him with a pleasant smile.

Borich went out first and crossed leisurely toward the general store on the right of the bank building. Severin moved outside, down the porch steps, and turned left along this side of the street. I waited inside the lobby door, the tobacco going dry and tasteless in my mouth. In under the wooden awning of the store Borich hesitated, wheeled casually and angled toward Jourdenez. They were talking together when I pushed through the doorway, descended the veranda stairs, and walked slow and straight toward the bank, feeling Nails Sugrue's eyes on me.

In the alley Borich struck suddenly at the half-breed before him. The blow didn't travel more than six inches but it nearly tore the blue-black head off Jourdenez's shoulders. His knees jacked instantly and he dropped in a senseless sprawl. Borich drove the startled horses back into the alleyway then, and Nails left the bank entrance and started for the corner to see what had happened.

"Sugrue!" I called sharply. "Flagg from the Cherokee, outside Broken Bow."

Nails spun swiftly and his hand streaked down. I've seldom seen a faster draw but that split-second he took in turning licked him. I lifted my right-hand gun level and thumbed the hammer. Flame roared out pale in the sunshine as the Colt bucked in my hand. Nails rocked back on the adobe wall, but even hit hard he got off a shot that fanned hot past my cheek. I threw down and blasted him again.

Nails Sugrue crumpled against the adobe, broken and wilting. His right arm dropped and the gun exploded into the dirt. Nails was sinking slowly, legs spraddling loose and wide, when that big window collapsed over his head and jagged gleaming shards of glass splintered and crashed around him as he went down and lay still. Severin was angling across on my left. Borich was already crouching at the cornice on my right. Boke Sugrue burst out of the bank, a monstrous squat figure, snarling savagely as he opened fire at me. I felt the scorching breath of lead as I lined my .44 on him. Severin already had a bullet into that hulking broad frame, and fire licked out along the front from Borich's steady hand. Hit from three sides almost simultaneously Boke stumbled, lumbered about in a drunken grunting circle, and toppled heavily into the clouding dust. There had been no recognition of me in Boke.

Red's fiery head bobbed into that shattered window and he might have drilled me from inside the bank if Borich hadn't reared up and shot him down in a crackling shower of glass, Red looking surprised.

At the same moment Sugar Sugrue came through the doorway, guns blazing in both hands, teeth flashing white in his dark handsome face. Severin and I were squared off and ready for him, slamming shots into him as he emerged shooting. Bullets burred, whined and splintered the hotel porch behind me, ripped up gravel as our slugs broke him down. Sugar tripped suddenly, pitched forward in a headlong stagger, and plunged face down into the dirt, his last shot blowing dust across my boots. Sugar had known me, I could tell.

I sensed danger even before Severin yelled. Whirling I saw Jourdenez reeling toward the corner, dragging at his gun. I hit him square in the chest with the last bullet in that gun, and was reaching for my left-hand sheath when the Mex fired wildly over my head. Blundering on past the corner into the open street Jourdenez floundered right into the muzzle-blast of Borich's Colt, and caught one of Severin's slugs at the same time. Riddled, beaten to the wall, Jourdenez clawed briefly at the stone cornice and lurched back onto his shoulders on the sun-baked ground.

THERE it was, over in a matter of seconds, four dead men in the street and one inside the bank. The end of the Sugrue boys at last, wiped out once and for all in Canasaw . . . I noticed now that the street was full of people, rushing toward the bank from all directions. Severin and Borich walked over beside me and we stood there, dull and dazed in the murmuring quiet after the racketing gunfire, feeling spent and weary and

slightly sick, the cordite choking thick in the heat-laden air.

"I want a drink," I said.

"Me, too," murmured Borich. "Comin', Sev?"

Severin shook his blond head, his face looking drained and bleak, pale and set under the bronze. "Not yet, boys."

"All right, Sevvy," I said. "You're the hero. You do the honors." I walked away with Bo, feeling strangely numb. I guess I wanted to hurt Sev because he was checking out on us.

In front of the saloon we met Sheriff Nickerson. He peered at us thoughtfully. "You boys sure surprise me," he said. "You sure do."

"Sometimes," I said, "we surprise ourselves."

With one drink down and another in hand I looked at Borich. "How's it feel to be on this side of the law, Bo?"

"Damn funny," said Borich. "But I got a feelin' I'm goin' to stay on this side, Flagg."

I nodded understandingly. For some reason I had that feeling, too.

* * *

And we did too, we went straight . . . We had learned something when the Sugrues died in Canasaw. The odds were too long against anybody on the wrong side. There were five of them, the bank all stood up, a fortune in their saddlebags, no law in sight . . . And still they were shot down on the spot. That was enough for Borich and me.

It took us about a year to run through the reward money. We didn't set up ranching or buy into any business. Without Severin it didn't seem worthwhile, and the habits of a lifetime were too strong anyway. We drifted around, drinking, gambling and enjoying ourselves. We figured if we ever hit it big enough we'd quit and settle down to something. But of course we never hit it that big.

Severin had stayed in Canasaw, a deputy sheriff under Nickerson, a hero in that town, and a cinch to marry Kay Morley, maybe take over the bank in a legal way sometime.

When our money was gone we didn't know what to do. We thought some of sticking up a stagecoach or a bank or something like that, but we remembered the Sugrues sprawled dead in Canasaw and we didn't try it. Instead we got these jobs in Painted Post, mainly because we had helped break up that Sugrue bunch. It struck us kind of funny when that paid off, the way Severin had claimed it would. Forty-a-month and found wasn't much, but it was a living. And we weren't always being hunted and hounded around the country.

This day we were in Pawnee Flats looking for a horse thief who had cleaned out the express company's corral at the post. The people of Pawnee had already strung him up when we got there. It was

too late to ride back home so we hired rooms in the Pawnee House. After supper we were smoking cigars in the lobby when Borich picked up a newspaper somebody had left. All of a sudden he whistled as he stopped skimming through it.

"Look at this about Severin!" he said, swearing and shaking his head.

"What?" I said. "Is he sheriff now? Or has he been made vice president of the bank?"

"Not exactly either," said Borich, pushing the paper at me and pointing to the head of a column:

DEPUTY ROBS BANK IN CANASAW, it said, and went on to tell how Severin, the man who prevented a bank robbery there eighteen months earlier, the man who rubbed out the Sugrue gang (single-handed, according to this account), had made off with about eighty thousand dollars. It also mentioned that Severin's engagement to Kay Morley, daughter of the bank's president, Mortimer I. Morley, had been broken a while back.

"Well, I'll be damned!" I said. "How do you figure that one, Bo?"

"I don't know," Borich said. "It looks like he couldn't stand the straight and narrow as well as we do, Flagg. It was his idea, too."

Back in Painted Post the next afternoon we tied up at the rack in front of the Open Range Saloon and stepped in for something to wash the alkali out of our throats. There at the end of the bar was that long, lounging, graceful figure we knew so well, the blond head turning casually, that charming smile crinkling the merry hazel eyes.

"Well, Flagg, and Bo," said Severin, shaking hands. "How are you boys?" He ordered a couple of glasses and poured from the bottle before him. "Ready to hit the trail again?"

"We're kinda tied down here, Sevvy," I said.

"Easy to get untied," said Severin. "I just did it myself."

"Yeah, we read about it in the paper," Borich said.

"Heard you were here," Severin said. "Came just to see you. Brought you a little somethin' too."

Then, as I raised my glass to drink, my leather vest fell open and Severin saw the deputy's badge pinned on the inside of it.

"I hadn't heard about *that* though," said Severin. He looked at Borich, and Bo showed him his shield. Severin tossed his golden head and laughed that musical laugh. "I'll buy those off you, boys. Twenty-five thousand apiece."

BORICH and I looked at each other for quite a stretch, and then we shook our heads. "It ain't enough, Sevvy," I told him.

Severin stared at us as if we were stark raving mad. "What the hell is this? You can't be serious."

"No joke," Borich said, using the words Severin had used in Canasaw. "We caught this from you, Sev."

"And with us it took, Sevvy," I said. "We'll have to take you in, boy."

Severin still couldn't believe it, but his smile was fading, his green eyes narrowing cold and hard. "Talk sense, Flagg."

"I am talkin' sense," I told him. "We're takin' you, Sevvy."

Severin put his fine-shaped hands on the bar, fingers spread. "You are like hell!" He pushed away from the wood and let his arms hang, elbows out, fingers apart. "You or nobody else."

I turned away from the bar to face him, my right hand spread near the gun-handle on my thigh. "Maybe you want to try to beat me, Sevvy?" I said. "You've always wondered whether you could or not."

There was a long tense frozen moment. I thought he was going to reach, and I went sick inside, not wanting to kill him, not wanting to die myself . . . Then I saw it go out of his eyes and face, and I knew with great relief that he wasn't going to draw. Severin knew he was good, but he didn't quite believe he was good enough to go against me. He had seen me too many times.

Borich stood there square and solid and balanced, his boots well apart, his hands at the buckle of his gun belt. "I'll shed these guns, Sev," he said. "If you want to try it the other way."

Severin regarded him with steady chilling green eyes, smiled suddenly, shook his blond head and laughed softly

aloud. "I guess you've got me, boys," he drawled. "I would run into the only two men in the country I can't fight. This don't make much sense to me, but if you're still bent on doin' it . . . Well, here I am."

"We won't make any fuss about it, Sevvy," I said. "We'll just take the money and ride you back to Canasaw."

"What happened to the banker's daughter, Sev?" inquired Borich.

Severin smiled gravely. "She never forgave me for killin' Sugar Sugrue. Your hunch was right, Flagg, about her likin' bank robbers. Sugar was there first and he must've made some impression."

We reported to our boss, the Painted Post sheriff, and got his hearty congratulations and leave to take Severin back to Canasaw. The three of us were riding together again, but it wasn't just like old times.

"Bank robbers ain't got a chance, Sevvy," I said on the trail. "Look what happened to the Sugrues and what's happenin' to you."

"Maybe you're right," said Severin. "But I still can't see you boys stickin' on the right side of the law."

"It's the safe side, Sev." Borich said. "The comfortable side."

"You've given up that idea of the ranch then?"

"Not entirely," I said. "We just decided the slow honest way might be quicker and surer than the shortcuts we used to take."

Severin laughed. "You're gettin' real noble, you two."

"It's all your fault, Sevvy," I said. "You started the whole thing, you know."

"Yeah," grinned Severin. "My biggest mistake."

OF course we never got him all the way back to Canasaw, but I think we threw enough fear into him to last his lifetime, before he made his break . . . We rode on without him and returned seventy-five thousand dollars to Mortimer Morley in the Cattlemen's Bank of Canasaw. The other five thousand was missing, we reported. We accepted the thanks due and a modest five hundred dollar reward to split.

Kay Morley scolded and tongue-lashed us properly for letting such a character as Severin escape the clutches of the law. Then she wanted to know if we had any idea where he might head for. I guess she was interested again, now that Sevvy had turned from deputy sheriff back to standing up banks.

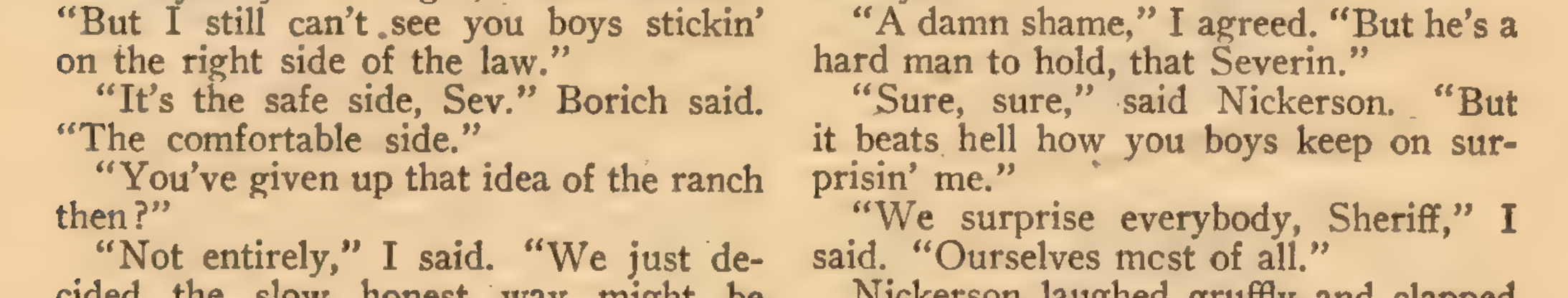
Sheriff Nickerson said, "Another good job. Too bad the prisoner got away though." There was a quizzical glint in his eyes.

"A damn shame," I agreed. "But he's a hard man to hold, that Severin."

"Sure, sure," said Nickerson. "But it beats hell how you boys keep on surprisin' me."

"We surprise everybody, Sheriff," I said. "Ourselves most of all."

Nickerson laughed gruffly and clapped us on the shouders. "Let's get in out of the sun, boys," he suggested. "I'll buy them drinks I didn't get around to before."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CURE HIM OR KILL HIM!

By VAN CORT

The man's knuckles, resting on the fence bar, were white

When two killers hit High Hat range, a man's life, a ranch-girl's future and a rangeland's peace rested on a nameless, beaten chore-hand's honor. . . .

THEY were breaking broncs at the Tolson High Hat ranch, getting material for new cutting horses for spring round-up. Old man Tolson had two good peelers in Buck and Sam and he always managed to sell a few extras on the side. Buck and Sam would take kinks out of the raw material and screen out usable horses. The rest of the crew that weren't working cattle or riding line would then begin the cow-education of each horse.

Today most of the crew were sitting on the fence like dozing crows, watching the two peelers put the kickers through their paces. That's the trick about a good peeler: He can soon get it into a horse's

skull there's no sense in overdoing the foolishness, and that it might as well get down to business. At the same time he knows almost by instinct how good a horse he's peeling.

Young Jeffrey, the crew youngster, couldn't conceal his admiration. "Sam," he declared, when the latter had finished ironing wrinkles out of a tough critter, "you orter be in rodeo."

Sam, a lean, hard-faced, steel spring of a man, climbed the fence for a smoke. "Nah," he said. "You can have the rodeo. It's all right for a show-off when you're young, or for once in a while when you're feeling your oats. But for a livelihood . . ." He finished with a vague gesture.

"Why not?" demanded Jeffrey. "Some of the best riders I ever seen was in rodeos."

"Like hell!" Sam snapped. "Only damned fools will try to break their necks every day and pound their kidneys to pieces. What you got in there but some ornery old outlaws so tired and wise to the game they have to have a bucking strap under their belly? Ever seen the take-off men come out and snap that buckle? All right, then you seen the horse stop bucking right away too . . ." He jerked a horny thumb at the breaking corral where Buck was crow-hopping a shiny two-year-old bay. "Don't take no bucking strap to make *him* go. This is the real stuff, this means something; this is work as has to be done. It's just like life, sonny, you can't fool with it. What you do has got to be real, have a purpose, kind of . . . you can't fool with no damn bucking strap."

There was an unconvinced look in young Jeff's eyes. "I still seen some good ones. Rodeo ain't bad work. Some fellers even get a chance to get into them pitchers they're making out there now in Californy. There's real money in that."

Sam gave another wave of the hand in deprecation. "I seen one of them at the fair. Ain't real—just some trickery. Just a passing fad. I saw one good rider at the Pendleton. He was ready to be the national champeen bronc-rider too, all around cowboy and all that. Know what happened to him?"

"What?"

"One of them outlaw, buck-strapping broncs tossed him, rolled on him, kicked him, broke his leg. He got out of the hospital and couldn't get near a horse. Yessir, saddle-yellow clean through. Never footed a stirrup again. Passed clean out of the picture. All right, there it is for you, the damn fool was trying to be the best there is by showing off, by trying to break his neck every day in the week. Good feller, too, they say."

"What was his name?"

"Tucker. Wes Tucker."

"Don't reckon I've heard of him."

"No matter. Nobody ever will again."

Sam was about to climb off the fence to tackle another horse. He flicked the butt from his fingers when Jeffrey tapped him gently on the arm and nodded. "Look, there's Chore Charlie. You mean, like *him?*"

Sam nodded, cast a glance in Charlie's direction. "That's right. Just as horse-scairt as Charlie, or maybe worse. Difference is maybe no-count Charlie never rode that I can see." A few moments later he was squeezing his saddle on another bronc.

JEFFREY, on the fence, was looking at the chorehand who stood near the corral bars, staring in at the horses as if in a trance. "Hey, Charlie!" the youngster called. "How is it today? You run out of postholes?"

The tall man winced, glanced at the kid and nodded absently. He was a hollow-chested, unshaven scarecrow of a man with constantly wrinkled brows. He had a habit of continually looking right and left when he crossed an open space, as if he expected someone or something to suddenly run him down. He had appeared at the ranch one day and had asked for a job, anything: cook's helper, cleaning, digging, feeding the chickens, but no riding or horsework. He wasn't used to horses, he had said. Didn't like them.

They were glad to have him. He worked hard at all the menial, non-riding jobs that are below a cowdog's pride to do. Fetch water, peel potatoes, chop wood? Where's Charlie? Hey Chore Charlie, Mrs. Tolson wants you to come over to the house and wash windows . . . It was like that, and Chore Charlie went without a squawk.

Once the strawboss, Rusty Nelson, told him to hitch up the water wagon and fill it up and drive it out to the Dry Creek round-up ground. Someone spied Chore Charlie trying to get the two oldest harness critters laced onto the rig. Others sneaked up. It became a circus. Like watching a frightened old lady drive a wheat combine and say her prayers at the same time. It was plain to see that Charlie never had been near a horse in his life. In the end he got even the old nags skittery with his nervous antics as he tried to hook the traces to the trees. The team ran across the yard and overturned the water wagon against the corner of the barn.

That was the time Rusty nearly fired him. In fact he did, and that was the only time anybody ever saw Chore Charlie stand up on his hindlegs. "But I tell you, Mister Nelson, they got away from me! I couldn't help it. Damn it, man, I couldn't help it!"

Rusty looked at Charlie and cocked his head. Slowly he began shaking with laughter. "You sure look funny, Charlie," he said. "All right, anybody that can holler that loud for a lousy, no-count job like yours, I guess can keep it."

Then, as Charlie walked away, the strawboss scratched his head. "And maybe sometime we'll teach you to get on a horse too. T'ain't decent, it ain't, a man working around a ranch and being scared of a little old horse." And the puzzled look stayed in his eyes because he couldn't forget the strange man who had popped out in sudden fury from behind the dull make-up of Shore Charlie, even if it was just for a few seconds. A man who could get mad enough wasn't quite hopeless.

CHARLIE stood with his hands on the fence, his eyes bugging as he stared through the bars at Sam, who was putting a big yellow claybank through the paces. Sam's technique was a fine combination of seat and legs plus use of the hackamore. Let the critter know you got a seat on him, and when he tries to unload you let him know you can handle his head, too, so he forgets about the seat.

Young Jeffrey gaped in admiration and could not help thinking of what a halloo a rodeo crowd would have made at that piece of riding. To waste such talent in a common breaking corral!

Something made him look at Charlie. The man's knuckles, resting on the fence bar, were white. His eyes were shining, his mouth open. His body was tense. It was as if his hands were glued to the wood.

The claybank put up a fine fight—but it soon learned. It came across the hard-packed ground in a series of dull crow-hops that told that it had found a master, but was not quite forgetting it was a proud horse. Sam guided the horse along the fence and grinned at Jeffrey: "That's how it's done, sonny—" Then he too saw Chore Charlie.

When somebody snaked a rope on the claybank and hauled him up to the fence in order to peel off Sam's saddle, Sam jerked his head in the direction of Charlie. "Hold it a minute, leave the kak on. Don't look now, but I got a notion this is where Charlie learns to ride." Then he winked at Jeffrey. Jeffrey winked back.

Men working in crews together, whether in timber, on shipboard or on a ranch, often feel the need for a goat. If some fool is different he is *it;* if he isn't different his undesirable position will soon make him one. Men have an uncanny instinct for smelling out goat-material, and there's no worse spot for it than a tough, hard-riding cattle outfit. The Tolson High Hat men had been conning up to Charlie ever since he overturned the water wagon. A horse-shy ranchhand was just their meat.

Almost by instinct the same notion as had hit Sam passed among the crew. Silently and casually they eased off the fence and pretended to be walking away. Suddenly they all converged on Charlie like a flock of vultures.

"Hey, what the hell?"

"This," said Sam with a grin, "is where you do a little ridin', sonny."

Charlie got white, and fought, but they frog-marched him through the gate bars that Jeffrey had pulled down. Simpson was still holding the claybank hauled close to the fence. The bunch moved up and squeezed the scared man into the saddle, Simpson snaked the loop off the horse and the men stepped back as Sam rapped it across the rump. "Ride 'im cowboy!"

The claybank, sensing no masterful rider on his back, jumped away bent on recovering its reputation.

Charlie pulled leather and hooked his heels, and for a moment it looked as if he was going to ride. He even sat straight up in the saddle. Then he folded over, crumbled and fell. A flying hoof missed him by an inch. He scrambled to his feet, ran for the fence and clawed at the bars. Like a swarm of hornets the crew was upon him again. Now they had blood on their teeth.

"Not that easy," said Sam, getting an arm-hold. "Hell and damnation man, you almost rode!"

This time Charlie fought worse than at first. He laid one man out cold before they pinned him. "Get away! Let me go! Damn you, let me go, I tell you!"

But gradually the men's anger matched his. Buck was on another horse now and laid a loop on the clay. In a trice he had the animal's head across the pommel and eared down. Again Charlie was frog-marched to the saddle and this time someone brought a double hogging string.

"This time we'll *make* the son ride!"

His legs were forked across the saddle and his ankles lashed hard under the belly. There was purpose and almost viciousness in the men now, a strange mob anger that they could hardly control. They would make over this queer one, who would fight enough to lay a man out but wouldn't ride. By God, they'd *make* him ride! They'd *make* him one of them. Who did he think he was to be different?

Only young Jeffrey's blood didn't run so hot. The look on Charlie's face chilled him, something about the crumpled man in the saddle on the horse took a grip on his heart. The looks on the faces of the older men around him scared him some. "Wait a minute, Sam," he said. "Take it easy! What if it rolls with him? He'll be a goner."

Buck said from the saddle of the take-off horse, "That's the chance he'll have to take. We'll kill or cure him."

"No, wait a minute now—"

"Get out of the way, kid!"

They blocked him off and stepped back. Buck lifted his hands from the clay's ears and roweled his mount out into the corral. The claybank and its rider left the fence like an exploding firecracker.

NOW that the thing was happening the men paled a little and their breath caught some. The claybank went wild. It didn't like the hogging string under the belly. It didn't like the rider attached thereto. Panicked, it sunfished and crow-hopped, shaking its great bulk in the air to shake off the man. It was no use. He stuck.

Feebly Charlie tried to ride, tried to pull at the hackamore. Some of the panic of the horse transmitted itself to the rider. He waved about like a rag doll. The claybank stumbled, set a knee to the ground. Was it getting ready to roll Charlie off? Jeffrey, frantic, started looking for a rope.

Then it happened. Unnoticed by the men, someone had pulled off the two top gate bars to the huge corral. Now that somebody hurdled the lower bars on a shiny black. In another moment Bella Tolson had caught the claybank's head and was forcing the bucking animal in a tight squeeze against the corral fence by left-roweling the black. "Cut that string, somebody!"

Jeffrey heard the angry command in her

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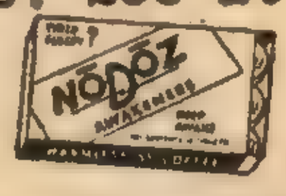

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voice. He dived under the black's belly, reached out and cut the hogging string with his sheath knife. Free, Charlie scrambled over the fence and sank to the ground on the outside.

The girl wheeled her horse about and faced the men angrily. Her hat was gone and a mane of shiny black hair flew about her face. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Sam," she said. "You could have killed Charlie. And you too, Buck. I'm surprised at you." She had a quirt in her hand now and as she rode up to the two men she looked as if she wanted to use it.

Sam was grinning wryly. Like the others he always stared in frank admiration at the heiress to the Tolson spread. Bella was pretty no matter what she said or did, but her beauty was really something when her cheeks were red and her eyes flashed in anger. "Now, Miss Bella, you better leave the doings in the breaking corral to us. We play pretty rough here when we try to cure a horse-shy man."

"Not if I can help it! I won't have such goings on! I'll have the bunch of you fired!" Her eyes were shiny now.

They knew she'd never have them fired but her manner made them uneasy. Suddenly a voice broke into the awkward silence. "It's all right, Miss Bella. I guess I had it coming. I didn't have any business around a ranch in the first place."

It was Charlie. He had got to his feet and was looking at Bella through the fence. She spurred the horse over and sat looking at him from the saddle. "It's all right," he said again. "They were just trying to help me, I reckon."

"A fine help," she said. "They nearly killed you."

Suddenly Charlie turned away from the fence, shrugging. "Maybe it doesn't matter." And he started walking away favoring his left foot in a slight limp.

Sam spread his hands in a gesture. "I guess when they sink that low they ain't worth bothering with anyhow."

Bella Tolson was about to say something, but suddenly she wheeled her horse and vaulted the bars. The men looked flatly at one another; the excitement had died in them. Over in a corner stood the claybank, wrinkling its upper lip in a wry grin.

No one spoke to Charlie that night at supper. He sat at the end of the kitchen table, eating by himself. When a man himself declares he's not worth bothering with, everybody leaves him alone. No scathing jokes tonight, no cusswords, no commands. Charlie was just air to the crew now.

A WEEK passed and he moved about the ranch like a shadow, doing his work, staying as far away from crew and horses as he could. Young Jeffrey caught him once standing near the corner of the barn, staring up at the main house. Something touched a chord in the boy at seeing the grown man, beaten, limp and with hanging head, staring into space. An instinct told him there was more to this chorehand than mere appearance. He felt like speaking to him, and remembered the queer way Bella Tolson had looked at Charlie that day in the corral. But eventually he shrugged and rode on.

Friday morning the cook loaded the chuckwagon and drove fifteen miles to the west end of the High Hat range for the build-up and culling of a herd for shipping. It cleaned the ranch of foreman and riders and emptied the cavvy corrals of new and old saddle stock. Charlie stood, a lean and wizened figure, by the cook shack, looking after the last man. He stood for a long while, eventually glancing up at the house. No life was stirring there. His mind went to his scant belongings and his walking shoes. No one had spoken to him for a whole week, except the cook grumbling that it was time to eat or the housekeeper calling him for stove wood. Maybe he could walk on to some other place and start over again. Start what? His shoulders sagged.

A noise from the emptiness of the corrals startled him. He went to the corner of the bunkhouse and saw a small cloud of dust in one of them; then his blood tingled. In the breaking corral was one horse, looking at him, teeth bared in a yellow grin.

The man shook all over, sweat pearled on his brow, then his teeth dug into his lower lip and he clenched his fist. The claybank! They had forgot to let him out. He would have to lower the bars now and chase the horse into the pasture.

Charlie straightened his back a little.

He reached inside the bunkhouse door and his hand energed with a rope. Like a drunk trying to steady himself, he headed stiffly for the corral. It took him ten minutes to get the top bar down and climb in. By that time he was pale and drenched with sweat and his hands were trembling, but his right clung white-knuckled to the rope.

After the experiment with making him ride both Sam and Buck had left the claybank alone. It seemed to have gone wild after feeling the inexpert Charlie on its back. Anyhow they had stopped its education. Now, seeing its last rider, it snorted in defiance and circled the enclosure at an angry trot.

Gingerly, and with uncertain steps, the man moved into the center of the corral and mechanically shook out a loop. It took a long time, a lot of teeth-gritting before he moved toward the fence to intercept the loping horse and there was nothing in the man's manner to show that he had ever undertaken the roping of a bronc before.

Not so with the horse. It stopped short at the poorly-thrown loop, ducked its head expertly and doubled back, leaving the man in a cloud of hoof dust. The beast bared its teeth and seemed to laugh.

A faint stir went through the man, as if that laughter had come, not from a horse but from some vaster, imaginary source. He grew a little quicker, tried a ruse, a certain tense sprightliness snapped into the movements of his arms and legs. He moved in one direction, leading the horse to believe that he was going to throw, then suddenly shifted his stance and ran the opposite way.

The claybank, ducking and turning, was fooled. The small tight loop snapped shut behind the wide jawbones and the horse reared with an angry squeal, ready to fight.

Charlie dug his heels into the ground, took a half turn around his hips with the rope and began pulling in. The claybank shook its great head, danced, reared, snapped at the rope and yanked the man around. The man fought himself and the horse with tight-bitten fury. Fought the stomach that was churning, the feet that wanted to run. Then it happened and in a second the fight was all over.

The claybank slackened the rope and ran forward, dancing, snorting, front hoofs pawing the air. The man turned, stumbled, was knocked down, rolled and felt his heart stand still as the flailing legs passed over him. Then the trailing rope seared across his face and he scrambled to his feet and ran for the fence.

He clawed himself over it and fell to the ground, groaning. When he was able to open his eyes he got up, beaten, bent, and limped toward the bunkhouse. A short while after he emerged once more, this time wearing his hat and carrying his meager little bundle of belongings. He had his walking shoes on. He headed for the gate.

Just as he was passing out of the yard a voice said, "Quitting?"

HIS eyes went slowly to the girl and from her to the breaking corral where the dust from the claybank, still trailing the rope, made a snake rise in the air. "There ain't much to quit, is there?"

Bella said softly, "What about the chores?"

He shrugged, not facing her. "I guess you'll have to get—" Then he interrupted himself politely, "Chores? Anything I can do before I leave, Miss Bella?"

"Yes." She nodded toward the corral. "You can take that rope off that horse. We're not in the habit of leaving ropes trailing around the stock here on High Hat."

He reddened slowly, his ears and eyes burning, realizing now fully that she had seen everything. He shook his head. "Sorry, it's no use," he said, and began moving past the gate again.

But something in her voice stopped him. "Wes Tucker, wait a minute!"

He didn't face her. "The name is Charlie."

She came up and stood only a couple of feet away. "How you ever happened onto this place I don't know," she said with some difficulty, "but I guess I knew you a week after you came."

"You got me mixed up with somebody else." His eyes were still on the distant breaking corral.

"How long are you going to run away from yourself?" she demanded. "How far do you think you can run?"

"You still got me mixed up. Wes Tucker was a champion rider."

"Remember the Pendleton Round-Up of four years ago?"

Before he could stop himself he said darkly, "I ought to remember."

"Come with me," she ordered him, "and I'll show you something." She began crossing the yard toward the house without looking to see whether he followed. For a moment he was on the verge of walking out through the gate and on his way, then watching her walk in confidence something steered his feet after her.

Inside the hallway of the house she turned and faced him. "At that round-up I saw the finest rider that ever sat on a horse. He took the prize money in almost every event." She hesitated a moment. Then: "He was very handsome. I guess about the best-looking man I ever did see. I had just turned twenty. . . ."

The chorehand was standing in front of the hall mirror. He looked at himself out of the corners of his eyes. Wes Tucker might have been handsome but the man in the mirror was a hollow-chested, sallow-cheeked ghost of a man, unshaven, ill-kempt, illdressed. Wes Tucker was far away and long ago. Chore Charlie was now and present.

He shrugged and stared dully at the girl; he couldn't grasp why she bothered talking to him.

"Don't you recall?" she said. "Dad and I met you and talked with you for a while. You signed this autograph." She turned to a closet and took down from a high shelf a fine white sombrero and thrust it at him. His hands almost shook as he saw under the front brim: *Best of Luck to Bella Tolson from Wes Tucker, the National Champion.*

He gave the hat back to her. "Kind of a shame to spoil a nice Stetson like that." At the same time he thought: Did I actually write National Champion myself?

"Don't you remember?" she said. "Don't you remember me at all?"

He shrugged again and for once looked directly at her. He had to be honest. "Maybe, maybe." Then: "There were so many . . . I guess I met so many people just then." There was some bitterness in his following words: "But I'd remember you from now." His eyes fell away.

"I guess you were too busy being national champion," she said.

The words hit him with a hammerblow. It was true. He had been so busy being champion that he had little time or mind for other people. She was standing next to the hall mirror and his gaze went from his own image to hers and again he wondered why she bothered detaining him here. He could not grasp it.

"You got it bad," she said. "I think the trouble with you now is that you were champion and you couldn't get over being thrown and kicked and rolled on when all the bets were on you. From champion to nothing. You couldn't take that—"

"Maybe," he said in a low voice. "Maybe . . ." Then he added, "You got all the answers, haven't you Miss Bella . . ."

Her cheeks flushed. Like the day she stopped the men in the corral from torturing him. Her eyes shone in something like anger. "I guess not. You seem only to remember that a horse kicked you and broke your legs and crushed three of your ribs, that you were six months in the hospital. That's all you think of when you get near a horse."

For the thousandth time he relived the awful moment when the horse went over him and the cheering, rooting audience vanished in a vast hollow gasp. He sweated again, a chill clutched his spine. He turned to the door and reached for the knob. "But outside of yourself you never get," she went on. "Last week you couldn't think of thanking me for saving your life—remember, I did? You could only think of yourself." She almost spat the words at him.

"I guess you didn't save much," he said.

Suddenly she hit him across the face backhanded in real anger, then immediately afterwards put her hand to her mouth as if she wanted to bite it. He had no answer to this and quickly went out the door and closed it after him.

SATURDAY was long and bleak and dry-dusty with a brassy sun. The chorehand sat on the cookshack step staring down before him. He couldn't make up his mind to leave but the rope was still trailing the claybank in the corral. He had

fed the animal through the bars but nothing had been able to drive him inside again. He thought of Bella Tolson and shook his head. There was a distance between them, thousands of miles . . . more than years . . . he was a ragged rundown tramp, a no-account chorehand. And yet she had known him, yet she had stood looking at him with eyes that still seemed to see him as he once had been.

He sat up suddenly as a bunch of riders swept into the yard. They pulled up to the house rail in a body and hailed the house. One man dismounted, the others remained in their saddles, holding rifles across pommels. Curiosity drove the chorehand to his feet and he sauntered across the yard till he reached the end of the gallery. Harvey Tolson was listening to the sheriff:

"Well, I guess they didn't come here then . . . been doubling back and forth up in the hills above. They're trying to cut across the Wayland Ridge but we got that road blocked . . ." He scratched his head and glanced at Bella Tolson who had come to the doorway. ". . . not that I want you to get all excited, but keep a weather eye open for them. Don't try to tangle with them if they should show up. They're a couple of hard cases, especially one. Nobody takes 'em alive. Once they're caught it's curtains for them." The sheriff looked up at Harvey, "There's none of your crew around at all?"

Tolson shook his head. "Only a no-'count chore hand."

After watering their horses the posse was ready to ride again. The sheriff said reassuringly, "Probably won't come this way, though. Just thought I'd warn you."

The chorehand went back to the bunkhouse, the rancher's remark ringing in his ears. As the posse vanished down the road whence it had come he reached up and took down the cook's rifle where it had been left above the kitchen cupboard. He was breaking the weapon when a sharp prod hit him in the back. "All right, all right, hombre," said an impatient voice. "Put the shooter down and let's take a little walk."

No account chorehand was right. Harvey Tolson had said it. He was a no-account for letting a hoodlum sneak up on him like that. This was his reflection as he walked in front of the stranger's gun to the ranchhouse.

Inside he was met by the contemptuous stare of Harvey Tolson. The rancher was sitting on a kitchen chair, supporting himself by the table edge; blood was running from an ugly wound in his temple where he had been gun-whipped into submission. Mrs. Anderson, the housekeeper, was just coming out of a faint. The man who had caused all this was deftly slipping into one of Tolson's best jackets and hat without losing the gun drop on his three charges.

There was a deceptive, almost pleasant calmness about the man, but the ice cold, wicked light behind the slate-colored eyes told the story of a man who was looking out for himself desperately, no matter what the cost. Seeing Chore Charlie he nodded curtly at his companion. "That all then?"

The other, skinny, dark, tight-bitten, nervous-eyed, nodded in reply.

"Ain't much, is it?" the leader said with relief.

The words stabbed Charlie. Tolson's bitterly agreeing look accentuated the

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pain. Bella, round-eyed, hopeless, stared at him for a moment. There was fear in her eyes. The housekeeper groaned and began to cry.

"Shut up!" said the man sharply with a nervous gesture. "And you people listen to me. We got to get out of here. We been hiding in the hills since morning waiting for that posse to come in here and go out." He pointed a finger at the chorehand. "Now, Joe, you'll go out and hitch a light buckboard with this duck here, make him work fast; chase the rest of the horses off the place. Savvy? Come up here behind the house."

Like a gun on a turret he wheeled on Mrs. Anderson and issued his next order in his clipped metallic fashion: "All right, mama, you make a fast cup of coffee, comprende. A couple of heavy sandwiches, anything you got, meat, cheese. Go to it, pronto!"

AS THE woman, shaking and mumbling, made no motion to start, Bella Tolson shook her by the arm. "Better do as he tells you, Mrs. Anderson. Please!"

"That's right, now . . ." and the man turned to Tolson once more. "Here's the trick." He jerked a thumb at Bella. "Your little pigeon there, we're taking her with us, savvy?"

"Like hell!" Harvey Tolson was half out of his chair when the outlaw knocked him back into it. "Sit still, amigo! Makes no difference to me do I knock off one man more or less at this stage of the game." He jiggled the gun. "Like I was saying, we take the pigeon along. She rides by me in the buckboard. Joe sits behind with his gun. Anybody comes up and wants to make trouble—there'll be a dead pigeon. . . ."

His sharp eyes scrutinized everyone in the room. "Too bad, amigo, but it's the only way we'll get out of this territory. When the posse comes back you can tell 'em how it is, or you can keep your mouth shut. That's up to you. Anyhow you know the score."

There was no fight left in Tolson. The killer had a point: He was at the stage of his game where any bet was worth trying. He had nothing to lose. Impotent rage surged in the chorehand, but no wise move could be made at the moment; like Harvey Tolson he could only pray and think. What went on in Bella Tolson's mind he dared not contemplate.

Mrs. Anderson, shaking and nervous, was already at the coffee-making and sandwiches. "All right, Joe, get moving, you'll get your bite and your drink when you come back with the rig."

Joe jabbed his gun into Charlie's back. There was an indescribable look on the rancher's face, a blank stare of frustration and despair. The chorehand did not dare look at Bella.

In the smaller stableyard behind the house he worked as in a trance, selecting a light buckboard and finding harness for the two men's horses. Their scheme was good. With their own saddles loaded into a bag behind the seat they would drive their own horses before the rig till they felt safe, then abandon the rig and the girl. With the saddles was a heavy canvas bag which the man, Joe, told him to load onto the rig.

The chorehand was half way through the task of harnessing before he realized that he was handling horses, even if the outlaws' horses were well-trained and tractable. Even so he shook off the thought for heavier contemplations on his mind. "All right," said the outlaw when the hitching was done, "any more saddle stock on the place?"

"All out to pasture or the round-up," said Charlie.

The man went to the corner of the house and scanned the corrals hastily while Chore Charlie's heart stood still. As the other's attention was momentarily diverted Charlie made an involuntary move. Instantly the gunpoint was on him again. "Try anything with me, brother, and you'll have that dead bird the sooner. Okay, drive her up."

The leader and Bella Tolson were on the kitchen gallery already with Mrs. Anderson watching them. Past them the chorehand got a glimpse of Harvey Tolson lying on the floor, groaning; another fresh gun-cut on his head. Apparently he had tried to put up a fight.

The man Joe swallowed a cup of coffee and crammed a sandwich into his pocket while the leader forced Bella onto the buckboard seat. "You drive 'em, Honey," he said in his tinny voice, giving her the

reins. "I can watch you better that way."

The chorehand figured his chances. There were none. Bella was marble-pale, giving him a desperate, blank stare.

As the outlaw, Joe, climbed up behind the seat, his gun trained on the people on the ground, the leader spoke again: "We're hitting southwest. Now mind you, that posse comes back up the valley you give them the lay of the land. Tell them to hold their horses. Anybody comes after us, tries anything funny . . ." He jiggled his gun at the girl.

He stared hard at Mrs. Anderson and the chorehand, seeing the information sink in. "Savvy?"

"I savvy," said the man called Chore Charlie hollowly.

"All right, sister, let 'em run."

In another moment the horses had swept the buckboard out of the yard.

FOR almost two minutes the chorehand stood looking after the buckboard, taking notice of the way it was taking, then he wheeled sharply and took the trembling housekeeper by the arm and led her inside. "Get to work on him," he said sharply, pointing to Tolson. "Bathe his face with cold water. Get some bandages." He picked up the fallen man, carried him into the living room and put him on a couch, then went to the dining-room looking for a bottle of whiskey.

When he returned with the liquor Tolson was already trying to sit up. "What happened? Where is she? Did they take her?" Then the man saw the answer in the eyes of the others and paled visibly. He tried to swing his legs off the couch to stand up, but the chorehand restrained him.

"Take it easy . . ."

"Take it easy?" Tolson wheezed hoarsely. "Take it easy, you dumb snot! Those rats . . . those filthy rats would do anything, anything." He held his head in his hands and groaned. Suddenly he began cursing with impotent rage. "That's what comes from being stupid enough to hire a good-for-nothing halfwit like you. A sleepyhead who lets a couple of killers ride right into the place. Get out! Get out, man, before I put a bullet through you . . ."

"I'm getting," said the chorehand and moved toward the door. "If the posse comes back through here warn them not to follow."

"Hey! Where you goin'—"

But he was already in the hallway, snatching down a brace of six-shooters he had seen hanging on an elkhorn rack the day before. He checked them and put them on. There was a duck jacket, and he snatched that. In the closet was a gray Stetson. It fitted. As he reached it down his hand touched a white one next to it and a queer electric current went through him. Then he was out the door, running.

He pulled the top bar from the corral gate and swung across with a bridle in his hand and a saddle on his arm. The claybank, seeing the man enter, trotted out from a corner but did not recognize the man. This man moved alertly, quickly, with a hardly noticeable limp. There were fire and sureness in his movements. He ran forward, twisted, turned, and as the horse tried to trick his way past, confidently picked up the rope.

A new fight began, but it ended quickly. This man was in a hurry, a savage impatience ruled his movements. It were almost as if he was in some arena, trying to make record time in a contest. When some of the dust had swirled away the claybank found itself standing with head hauled high, close-snubbed to the top of a fence post. After a short pause the man came up breathless, slinging on a saddle as he kept close by the insulted and surprised animal's forelegs.

The cinch and latigo were yanked tight and tied and a plain bit was forced into the horse's mouth. This man was no fool and was in a hurry; he knew all the tricks. How to make a critter take an unwanted bit, how to get into the saddle without getting squeezed against the fence.

The bucking exhibition that followed would have delighted the most spoiled audience at the Pendleton round-up, except for its briefness. When the horse finally stopped sunfishing, crowhopping, twisting and turning and stood still shuddering its flanks in disappointment, the rider was still in the saddle and undisputed master.

But here was no audience, only heat and sun and loneliness and fearful worry; only the voice of one man as he leaned down

and patted the claybank's neck. "All right, old-timer, let's do some real riding. We can't fool here all day." He rode over to the gate, took down another bar and, wheeling the horse neatly, returned and jumped it over.

A plan was already forming in his mind as he headed in the direction the buckboard had taken. The desert road went southwest and after ten miles veered straight south. There were two towns down that way. Telepac, a cattle shipping point, and Lamson, a mining town near the state border. Lamson had a bad reputation and it was likely that the posse had come up from there, empty-handed and in hot pursuit. It would be good strategy of the bandits to double back down there once they had shaken the posse off the trail. Lamson was a haven for characters on the dodge; there were ways of finding hide-aways and protection down there, and if a run for the border across the next state was contemplated the two men could keep the girl with them as hostage.

The rider recalled the eyes of the leader and thoughts chilled his marrow. His blood froze again as his glance swept north, and he pulled the claybank up sharply and sat in tortured indecision. To the northwest he saw the tiny dots of the posse riders pour through the Apache saddle pass and enter the desert valley and then head south.

Obviously they had sensed that the two men were doubling back. To head across the desert to cut them off and warn them about Bella's role of hostage was impossible. The country was too rough, there were deep canyons between, a horse had to follow the north and south-going roads on either side. He sat in a sweaty quandary while the horse danced nervously under him, feeling his indecision. Should he try to follow the south road from High Hat and hope to intercept the posse at the forks before they saw the buckboard and perhaps got suspicious of it? And before the two men found that they were being followed? He discarded the thought.

HE RECALLED then the high country path that went in an almost straight line from High Hat to Lamson. Since the desert roads curved westward and then south the high path was shorter; but it was too rough for a horse. Rocks, petrified formations, ravines, mesquite thickets, a natural bridge. He remembered it because he had walked it from Lamson when he first came to High Hat. The Indians had known it in old days as a surprise, march-stealing war trail, but that was before the horse. There was a joke among the High Hat riders that a man could ride it, maybe, when he was drunk. Never sober. Then he'd have too much sense.

And he had to gamble that the buckboard and its passengers were headed for Lamson. Anyhow he'd also have to get to Lamson in that case before the arrival of the buckboard to head off any possible secondary posse that might be laying for the two men.

He made his sudden desperate choice, dug in the heels, gave the claybank its head and steered for the hills on the eastern side of the valley.

It was a ride that neither horse nor man would ever forget. As initiation to being broken in as a saddle horse the claybank got put through the mill. The man was thrown from the saddle once, and by a miracle, by hanging on to the reins, saved himself from losing his stumbling mount. He tore through mesquite thickets, lying down along the horse's back; he led the claybank down through three rocky ravines and literally pulled the beast up on the opposite sides by its head. Exhausted and dry he rode on for the better part of an hour. He crossed the natural bridge at a sharp lope where another man would have walked and led, foot by foot, step by step. But time's shortness was an ominous black swift-winged bird in his whirling brain.

When the horse thought it had had enough, and the man knew that he was at the end of his strength, he still drove the claybank on and on. Uphill and down rocky slides, across cruel foot-punishing rocky ground best traveled only on moccasin-clad feet.

And he came at last out on the rocky plain above the valley where there was a view of Lamson in the distance; and his heart ticked icily in his chest as he saw the heavy dot and the dust feather on the road north of the town nearing it: The buckboard. It *must* be it.

HE RODE like mad again then, using the last strength of the foam-flecked stumbling horse, and came down on the south side of the town. Hitching the claybank outside a saloon he became suddenly leisurely and casual in his demeanor. Under the scrutiny of suspicious eyes he sauntered into the bar and had two quick drinks. He swung out again and moved listlessly up the street, his weather-eye out for travelers from the north. Luckily there was no sign of any manhunters or secondary posse.

He loitered on a street and alley corner, his face in the deep shade of his hat-brim. When the buckboard came down the main street cautiously he began to cross the roadway, staggering ever so little.

Bella Tolson was still driving, the leader sitting close to her, his arm around her on the backrest, his right hand near his gun. Joe was in the back scanning the houses, with his gun out and partly hidden in his lap. The horses were played out; they shuddered in the harness and headed willingly toward the livery corral gate across from the Golden Miner.

At that moment the man who had ridden the claybank stumbled against the corral gate post and hiccoughed loudly. The two outlaws looked at him with interest.

"All right gents," he said then, straightening up. "This is it. Sorry . . . can't give you better odds . . ."

The reports of his guns drowned out his words.

It was too much of a surprise for the head man with the sharp metallic voice. He crumbled in his seat. Only Joe was quick enough to get in a shot, which tore through the High Hat chorehand's outer shoulder muscle; then he too rolled over and lay still, his head lolling over the edge of the tiny wagon bed. He was dead when he hit the wagon bed.

Bella Tolson saw now who was under the pulled down hat-brim. "Wes," she stammered. "Wes Tucker . . ." Then she fainted.

The horses were winded and gun-trained. They did not bolt as the man who had ridden the claybank wheeled his back against the stable wall, his guns poised high, alerted against any possible comers. In the far distance out on the road to the north he got a glimpse of the posse, moving in fast.

Long after, when he was driving the buckboard back to High Hat, Bella Tolson, sitting snugged against the crook of his arm, had to answer a question. "What I can't figure is," he was asking her, "how did you know it was me when I walked into High Hat that time? How did you recognize me? I don't look the same—"

"Because," she said, pausing to glance up at him, "as I told you, I had just turned twenty. You were the finest looking man I ever saw on a horse. Well, you wouldn't understand. Anyhow, there's something about a champion you never forget."

"I've forgotten him," he said, listening to the claybank loping along behind the buckboard. "I've found something more important to think about—outside myself." The girl looked at him, smiled, and promise was in her eyes.

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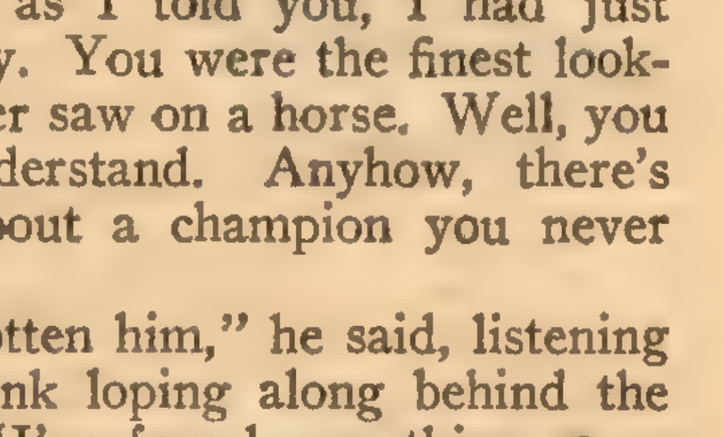

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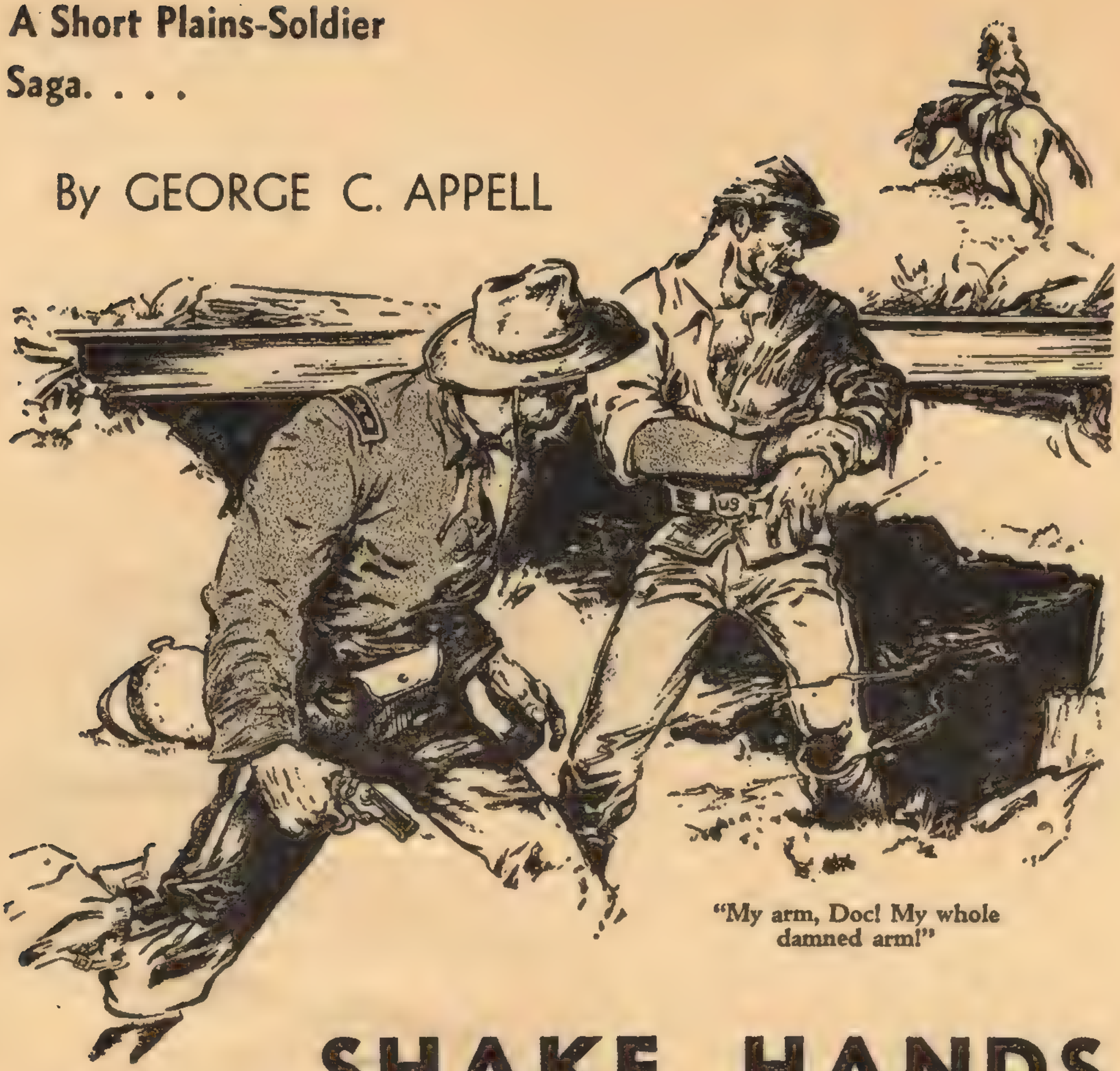
"My arm, Doc! My whole damned arm!"

SHAKE HANDS WITH THE DEVIL!

"If you go over the hill, Conlin, you'll be shaking hands with the Devil. Don't do it," the greenhorn contract surgeon advised. But Trooper Conlin never knew that in that hostile country, any helping hand—even that of Satan—might be sorely needed. . . .

CONLIN wanted to go back to the post, when he heard the threatful whistle in the prairie wind, but the contract surgeon shook his head and pointed the troop gelding into the weather. "This'll blow off," he called.

Conlin rubbed the ragged purple scar that lay across his tight lips and silently, bitterly, cursed the day, the Army, himself, and contract surgeons in particular. This one was new to the service and new to the west, and beyond the requirements of his profession he knew very little. Yet he carried a brevet first lieutenancy in his pocket, and Conlin was rankless.

He put his horse after the surgeon's, trying to keep both eyes alert to the sand-lashed distances; trying to strengthen his hopes that nothing would happen; that it was, after all, a treaty year, and that

the semi-civilian ahead would change his mind and forget all about making sketches of the Black Hills. For today, anyway.

Dr. Hillyer turned and cried through the wind: "We'll pick up Dry Fork, then sit it out!"

"I hope," Conlin murmured, and nodded vigorously. This detail was supposed to be a plum, for him—a sort of reward for having tried to defend Senator Rackham when that worthy had gotten into trouble with a hunt party and wound up dead. Sergeant Rossiter had said, "Conlin, once you were a Bowery bum, but now you're a man. A soldier, Conlin. So ride herd on this saw-bones and see he stays outa trouble. A cake-walk, Conlin—no troop duty, no Stables, no barracks. The best I can do for you."

And now the saw-bones wanted to sketch the valleys of the Hills and otherwise make a nuisance of himself. He had his book with him, too, a book of surgical technicalties called *Up-To-Date Practises In The Field,* by one D. Hibbs, Plains Publishing Company, Yankton, and post rumor had it that that was all and everything that Dr. Hillyer knew. It was never out of his saddle bag, and the week before, when Shaky Strong had cut himself with a paring knife, Hillyer had consulted the book, pursed his lips, and murmured, "Leave it open. We don't bind cuts anymore."

They walked their horses through the rising norther, neckerchiefs wrapped to mouths, heads low against the bite of the whistling sand. Presently they passed the old Snake Creek heliograph station, now merely a rusted tripod that had been abandoned the year before when the treaty was signed; and a mile further on, they gave the horses their heads into the first south passes of the Hills. The gentle ravines were protection against the sandstorm, and Dr. Hillyer lowered his neckerchief and looked back and grinned. "Not bad."

Conlin spurred forward. "We're almost a half-day's ride from the post." It was hard to call this slim young man "sir" or "Lieutenant," so he added, "Doctor."

"Don't worry about it."

"I'm not, but mebbe you should be."

Hillyer was amused. "Why?"

"Well"— Conlin felt his scar twitch as he mouthed for words— "the doctor's new to the country out here. He should be careful."

"He will be." They stopped, dismounted, and led the animals into a shallow cutback where a man could light a cheroot and brush the sand off his shirt. Hillyer exhaled and asked: "Conlin, know much about Indians?"

"Some. Me an' old Rossiter an' Strong an' Dutchy Werner rode escort for Senator Rackham not long ago. He got himself shot to pieces—"

"I heard about that."

"—but I learned a lot about Indians. What'd the doctor wanta know?"

Hillyer shrugged a lean shoulder. "Medical research informs me that they induce labor in pregnant squaws by roping them to stakes, then galloping toward them and jumping the pony at the last minute. That true?" He brought out the book, an immense, heavy leatherbound book with thin, nickel filigree in the cover.

"I wouldn't know about that, Doctor." Conlin gazed sorrowfully down the ravine at the swift storm on the prairie beyond. He wished he was back on the post; wished—almost—that he was back on the Bowery.

The book slapped shut. "What got you in the Army, Conlin—a woman?"

"Hell, no." Conlin licked his scar. "But anybody can get me out. I'm fed."

"Sick of it?" The doctor was arranging sketch block and charcoal sticks.

"Yuh . . . over the hill, I guess." Talking to this contract civilian wasn't like confessing to a line officer, wasn't like admitting to the Old Man that the future held wide open spaces. Wasn't like telling Rossiter: "So long, Sarge."

"That's too bad." With fast, sure strokes, the doctor was delineating the ravine's perspective. "When I was walking the wards back in New York, my one ambition was to be an Army surgeon. And now I am." He smudged charcoal with a deft thumb, and afternoon shadows appeared in the drawing. "I have hobbies, though, and this is one of them." He cleared his throat. "I also write a bit."

"I see." Conlin was about to suggest a return to the post, when he hesitated.

turned, and blurted: "New York? You from New York?"

"Uh-huh. . . . 'way uptown, though. Twelfth Street." Bushes and stumps sprang to life on the block. "You a New Yorker?"

"I was." The words were vicious, and Hillyer glanced sharply at him.

"Didn't like that either?"

"Nope. Nossir." The rancid memory of a damp night rose like a fetid thing in Conlin's mind; rose ghoulishly to haunt him, to point with shame at him. . . .

A DAMP, rain-choked night when the gas lamps were fluttering in the breeze off the East River and misty figures on muffled feet trod the cobbles in sullen, arrogant silence. A night when murders lay barely within control of liquor-rutted brains, and when the high-helmeted policemen walked in pairs. And it was on that night that Conlin, perched on a tall stool as lookout in a Bowery bar, saw the well-dressed drunk lurch into the street, saw the three cat-footed men prowl after him, and heard the shot. . . .

In that moment he dropped from the stool and raced outside and double-timed down the sidewalk in the direction of the well-dressed body that lay huddled against the curb. There was a handsome reward offered to informers, and he intended to have it. But the thieves had gone and he was alone in the drenched fog, hardly visible in the wobbling yellow light from the nearest lamp. Then a whistle piped and boots clumped on the cobbles and a pair of constables pumped out of the river mists and bellowed at him to stand still.

He whirled, bent low and darted up the sidewalk toward the bar. Another bellow brought men running—men who bore down on him in a knee-propelled mass. He cut across the street— "Stop, murderer!" —and came within sight of Cooper Union's gray bulk. A figure appeared as from a spirit lamp, one arm drawn back.

The cobble stone cracked into his mouth and sent him spinning into an iron fence. He plunged a foot into the approaching figure, felt it give in the middle and saw it collapse—and hurled himself away from the fence. Then he sprinted toward Broadway with its ambling shoppers and brighter lights. "Stop—killer!" The mass crossed in front of the Union.

Down Broadway, walking fast, breathing hard, chill with nervous sweat. Into Canal, walking faster— "A tall man—no hat—he's a killer!"

Two evenly-spaced lamps on a green-painted booth drew his eye, and a second later he was gasping: "Where do I sign?"

The recruiting officer—a sergeant who'd left one arm at Shiloh—silently gave him paper and pen and a sympathetic look. Recruitment, in lower New York, came from many sources and for many reasons. "Ye're bladin', lad."

Conlin wiped his split lips impatiently; blood plopped onto the papers and he tongued it off. He signed quickly. "Fill it in later—am I in the Army now?"

The sergeant drew a thumb knuckle the length of his moustaches. "Ye surely, surely are, lad. . . . here's a bandage." Recruitment, in lower New York, often required first-aid measures.

Outside in Canal Street, the mass drummed past . . . "Stop him! He's a killer!"

Conlin sat on a stool wearily, all the breath and direction gone out of him. A rush of dizziness lightened his head; his eyes lost focus. He scarcely heard the sergeant tell a runner: "Get help from City Hospital."

HILLYER finished his sketch. "Too bad you don't like New York. Nice city."

"It depends on what you're doing there." The wind storm was dying to fitful breezes. the last sunlight of the day was bronze in the cloud tatters to westward, and Conlin got to his feet. "We better be movin', Doctor."

"So we should." Hillyer slid the block after the book and strapped shut his saddle bag. He was reaching for reins when he noticed the scar. "That's a beaut, Conlin. Indian wound?" Eagerness lifted his voice.

"No." Conlin mounted and eyed the doctor impatiently.

"I wouldn't desert the service with that marker. You'd be recognized anywhere."

Hillyer mounted and tossed away his cheroot.

"I'm deserting because I hate the life an' I despise the people in it. It hasn't changed in a hundred years. A man can't learn anything but how to pitch manure an' shoe a horse."

Hillyer pondered that. Then he shook his head heavily. "Don't shake hands with the devil, Conlin—which is what you'd be doing if you quit. You'll learn a lot, if you quit—but it won't be constructive." The doctor's eyes centered on the scar. "How'd you come by that?"

"I—I cut myself shavin'."

They took up the trot when they reached the prairie; it would be deep dark by the time they returned to the post, and possibly a patrol would have been sent after them, and the Old Man was notoriously economical of temper when it came to risking men needlessly. Through the afternoon haziness they rode, one-and-one, the doctor in the lead.

Approaching the Snake Creek region, the doctor kept staring south at the remains of the heliograph, eyes alight with the intensity of discovery. "I'd like to get a sketch of that, Conlin."

"Doctor Hillyer, don't be a fool."

Hillyer reined and turned. "What do you mean?" He wasn't angry, he hadn't been in service long enough for that. But he was curious.

"Night'll come down like a hatch closin', an' night, Doctor, isn't a good time for two lone men to be camping." The memory of the hunt party that had swirled from the Hills and cut off the senator and chopped him to pieces was still fresh in Conlin's mind; and though the Rev. Fusty was supposed to have most of the hunters safely in hand at his mission near the post, you never could tell. "Let's trot, gallop, walk . . . trot, gallop, walk. We might make it before moonrise."

David Hillyer had lived in a world of formaldehyde and chloroform for so long that the scent of winds that had rushed for a hundred miles without contamination was a strong wine in his nostrils. And the tribes were at peace— "No excitement now, Hillyer, you'll have little to do on the frontier but splinter extractions and mule kicks"—and there wasn't anything to do until Sick Call in the morning. "Conlin, I'll rough it out in passing. We'll walk past the old station—look at the shadows in the excavation where the shack was!—and by moonrise, we'll be home."

Nevertheless, being a contract civilian and not a line officer. . . . He relaxed his word and, presently, was sitting cross-legged in the sand at the edge of the old cellar, happily sketching.

Conlin pinned-out the horses and lined his gums with Plantation Shag and squatted by the rusted tripod, helpless in the grasp of a system he hated for its incompetence and despised for its lack of learning. He glumly faced the doctor, thinking that soon, by God, he'd learn something, and that would be how to escape to Canada . . . And then, abruptly, from the low passes of the southern hills a file of riders appeared, the ponies spaced at long intervals. The icy feathers of fear stroked his spine and his mouth was open to call out when Hillyer raised his eyes.

"Seen a ghost?"

Conlin's impulse was to lace a leg over his horse and flog the beast south toward the post for help. But he'd never find help—not in time. What had Rossiter said about hunting warriors?— "Show fear, an' you're a dead man. Stand up to 'em, an' you might live."

"Dr. Hillyer, behind you."

The contract surgeon turned without rising and looked long at the mounted pony riders in the blurred distance. He counted them with a finger— One, two, three . . . six, finally. He put the charcoal and the sketch block back into his bag and stood up. "I suppose we should do something majestic, though I can't think what."

"We should do something fast. This is medicine ground, or used to be."

Still staring west at the riders, Hillyer murmured: "Medicine ground?"

"The old heliograph. They never could figure how it sent sun-signals to call soldiers."

"Odd." Hillyer turned away from the slowly-walking riders. "I made a hobby of telegraphy once. Interesting stuff." He swung a thumb over his shoulder. "They must have traced us from that ravine by Dry Fork, where I was sketch-

ing." The doctor sighed and asked: "Well?"

"Well?" The fear had subsided in Conlin, and he felt only tenseness. Tenseness, and a horrid expectancy, such as a condemned man feels when he sees the executioner approach, yet still hopes for a reprieve. "We better not run."

"No, we'd better not. You have a gun, of course." He fumbled in his canvas pockets and drew a derringer. "I brought something along, in case of small game." He winked.

Conlin unloosened his carbine in its leather ring socket and took both horses off the pins and staked them down hard. He stood next to Hillyer, fists on hips, squinting into the setting sun at the line of plodding ponies.

The riders weren't painted; ostensibly they were hunters trying to find a small watering herd before winter drew its frozen, white trance over the land. But they were young, all of them, and they rode with the insolence of fire-blooded youth. There were no old men nearby to restrain them now, but doubtless there were soft-skinned squaws back in camp who would be impressed with hairy tokens of victory.

Gradually, the six riders fell away to the south and started a long, slow loop around the two waiting men by the tripod.

Twilight was dimming the day, and there was no sound save the occasional creak of grasses in the fitful prairie breeze.

Conlin spat. "Helluva way to get it, Doc."

"How do you know you will?" Hillyer seemed surprised.

"If they was square, they'd come up an' talk, an' mebbe bum some tobacco, an' then ride out. But they're puttin' a lasso around us already."

"Conlin, you talk too much. It's a bad habit in any profession. Talk can cause fear, and fear unbalances the thinking. . . . Watch there!"

THE small circle was closing; and when within a hundred yards, it stopped suddenly and the riders sat like stone images, their twelve black eyes devouring the two men, the two horses, and the tripod.

"They're makin' sure the helio can't talk any more, Doc." Then Conlin acted on impulse. "Get into the excavation, Doc. Slow. Easy."

First, Hillyer unstrapped his saddle bag and pulled out the book of Up-To-Date Practices In The Field. Then he ambled to the pit, looked once more at the ring of ponies, and dropped in. The crown of his hat alone showed above the rim.

After a moment, Conlin grasped his carbine, lifted it free of the ring socket, and jumped beside Hillyer. "Save that derringer, Doc. It can't hit a barn at thirty yards."

"No-o . . . but maybe I can. Used to be a hobby of mine—trajectory, windage, drop. Interesting stuff." He had the derringer out. "We used to suspend wooden blocks from strings, then fire into the blocks. That way, you could tell the muzzle velocity of the bullet by the sway of the strings, the split of the wood, and the force with which the blocks hit pillows you had fastened to a backstop. Really interesting."

"Doc?" Conlin slowly cocked the carbine. "When did you get time to study pill-rollin'?"

David Hillyer quietly picked up his mighty tome and caressed it. He smiled calmly. "Books speak loudly, if you ask them, and I'm a very inquisitive man."

The nearest two riders suddenly shouted and swung under their ponies' necks and shot toward the tripod and careened away and skidded in a tight turn and hammered past the excavation and had the staked horses off the picket before Conlin could re-aim. They streaked away to the south with the captured troop geldings on short rein.

"Now we're in the infantry," Conlin grunted.

Hillyer wasn't disturbed. "Infantry, Conlin, is equally effective on the defense and the offense, while cavalry is primarily an offensive arm. Infantry—which is what we now are—can defend at three-to-one odds, which is what we have."

"Where'd you hear that, Doc?"

"I read it in a book. . . . Look out!"

A spatter of shots ripped through the twilight from the cantering circle of ponies. The tripod jerked once and dust filmed off it. Conlin fired and fired again and the circle widened away, its riders

dim in the dusk. Conlin fired once more.

Conlin leaned against the side of the excavation and uncocked the carbine and let out a long, rasping breath. "That should be all, for awhile."

Hillyer rested his chin on the sandy rim of the pit and took off his hat and narrowed his eyes. "They're coming together, about a half mile away." He stood back, teeth white in the pale shine of a growing moon. "What now?"

"Now? Why, we just stay here till they decide how they want us for breakfast." Conlin was thinking of Canada, with its new ways of life and wide forests, and open roads.

"Nonsense, Conlin. . . . you know, this is damned interesting. Here I am on my first frontier hitch, and I get attacked by Indians! I'll learn something."

Several phrases occurred to Conlin, but he spoke none of them. After all, this little doctor was, by brevet, a first lieutenant, however ignorant; and at least until a messy death overtook them, the regulations of the service would prevail. So Conlin said nothing through that long, cold night, but only watched the moon wheel across the heavens, and thought his desperate thoughts and reflected painfully upon what might have been, could have been, had not an overly-inquisitive tenderbutt interfered, and—yes, that was it—shaken hands with the devil.

Gray dawn came on and paled to saffron and died in the pink wash of the rising sun. It would be a hot day, a bright day, a miserable day to die. Conlin inserted the last of his Plantation Shag in his gums and braced the carbine on the rim and drew a test bead on the first of the trotting riders.

"Kiowas," he intoned, and held fire. "Kiowas?"

Hillyer seemed chipper, despite a night spent slumped in a sand pit. His beard was a light shadow on his jaws, his eyes were alive and his hat lay smartly on one side of his head.

"Yuh. Southern Indians they are, but sometimes they hunt north when they's a drought down below. Guess ol' Fusty's really keepin' his Arapahoes on the reservation, like he said. . . . Know Mrs. Fusty?" Conlin smiled winsomely; with the end of life approaching on each fall of a pony's hoof, he wanted to talk about the small things. "She planted climber roses by the guardhouse, so's the boys could smell something besides horse manure while repentin' their ways. . . . Hold fire with that derringer, Doc. Save it for yourself."

"For myself?"

"Yuh. Don't let 'em take you alive, Doc. You'll wish you'd never left Twelfth Street."

The circle began its slow, steady spinning again, just out of mid-range. One of the riders who had seized the troop horses the evening before swung surprisingly near, then fluffed off three shots and raced away to the circle. It began tightening, closing, grasping . . .

Conlin risked a shot and hit a pony and laughed as it sprawled in creaming dust. Its rider dragged himself away on a shattered leg and Conlin fired again and missed.

"Like this, Conlin." Hillyer dug his elbow into the rim, raised the derringer at a sharp angle, sighted left and right of his forearm, and fired. The crawling man doubled, shuddered, and lay still. "Used to be a hobby of mine. . . ."

Then the Kiowas came in hard, came in fast, throats open with wails of hate and hurt and anger. Soft hooves made a tympanum of muted thunder and weapons spanged and spat and cracked sharply and spat to silence as the five riders cantered away to mid-range once more.

"Conlin, let me have that carbine for a moment. I have an idea—*Conlin!*" Hillyer fell to his knees, hands under Conlin's shoulder. The ragged, purple scar was wrenched to one side in the initial agony of a bullet strike. "Conlin?"

Conlin opened his eyes and whistled once through tight teeth, "My arm, Doc. My whole damned arm!" The sweat-blackened blue flannel of his sleeve was a-glint with seepage now; it ate into the dusty creases and was sticky to the doctor's prying fingers.

The Kiowas were down the prairie, packing off their dead man, headed for the pinned-out stolen troop horses a mile away to northward.

Hillyer rolled up his sleeves and flipped open his book. "Wish we had some whiskey, Conlin." He found a scalpel in the

metalwork of the inside cover and hefted its lightness.

But Conlin shook his head wearily. "Oil, Doc. Hot oil to pour into the wound. We got no oil, Doc. . . . She'll fester." And he thought: What difference does it make anyway?

"Oil? We don't use oil anymore. We don't suture, we don't bandage. Leave it open, I say. So does Hibbs." He studied the book. "Now, Conlin, we haven't much time, so you take this"—he shoved a canvas glove into Conlin's teeth— "bite hell out of it—you will anyway—while I do a debridement. Know what a debridement is?" The scalped flashed in the sunlight. "First . . . you cut down . . . the tract of the bullet . . ." The glove ends fanned open as teeth crushed through it . . . "and cut out the bad tissue . . . so . . . you can wash the nerves . . . *hmm* . . . bullet came out . . . no arteries severed . . . and"— The glove buckle bent, broke, and came apart— "We then take alkali water from our canteen . . . and rinse . . . after which, we tie off the large bleeders . . . but instead of the archaic hot oil—which he haven't got—we leave it open . . . so the bad stuff'll drain out . . ." The four fingers of the glove fell off. "Next, we use the patient's neckerchief for a sling, no tourniquet being necessary . . ."

"Oh-h. . . . Lord in heaven! G-G-*God!*"

"You can relax now . . . you're a good patient, Conlin." Hillyer wiped clean the scalpel and returned it to the brass plate in the cover. He was about to close the book when he stopped short, eyes fixed on the plate. His tongue raced around his lips as monstrous concentration closed his mind to everything but his idea. The sun reflected brightly on that metal plate, and it seemed to warm his brain.

Conlin's breathing was normal once more, and the light was returning to his eyes. "You talk . . . like you'd treated me before . . . Doc." He worked his jaws tiredly to draw sustenance from the Shag. His arm was numbing, it tickled slightly, and he felt dizzy.

"Hm?" Hillyer's attention was still on the plate; carefully, he drew the scalpel from its fastenings.

"You gonna cut me some more?"

"Hm?. . . No, not you . . . . this plate. It's supposed to hold instruments—another of Hibbs' ideas—but I'm going to take it off." He worked the scalpel under the screws of the plate and twisted. "Treated you before? Yes . . . one night in New York, when I was walking wards in City Hospital"—one edge of the plate came loose— "I was called to treat an Army recruit who'd been bashed in the mouth. . . . cut himself shaving, probably . . . and I thought if the Army couldn't take better care of its men than that" —the plate came off the inside cover— "I'd be smart to help out . . . where I could." He held up the plate happily. "Now, Conlin, we'll re-open the Snake Creek heliograph station . . . Stand up and watch those pirates for me."

Conlin eased the carbine into the crook of his good arm and peered down the prairie. The dizziness was leaving him as excitement sparked through his brain. "Five on the way, but slow."

"Hold 'em if you can." Hillyer played with the plate tentatively.

"What you doin', Doc? Offerin' gifts to the Kiowas?"

"No, to the Old Man." Sunlight exploded on the tilted metal square, and David Hillyer grinned triumphantly. "I figure by this time, he's out with a patrol, me being the only medical man for five hundred miles. But I also figure that he thinks we're much farther south than we are, and is poking around aimlessly. . . .

"Funny thing, about the Old Man. He has dyspepsia induced by occupational hypertension accentuated by nervous drinking . . . and maybe he'll have some liquor with him, if I can get him here by sun-signal . . . telegraphy used to be a hobby of mine. Never tell when it'll come in handy. . . . There!" The plate dipped and straightened, dipped and slid sideways . . . "He just might catch these flashes, if we keep 'em up long enough." The plate caught sunlight and sent it south in even, blinding intervals. "He'll have a lookout on a hill, if I know him. Never liked to waste men needlessly, which is why he's got dyspepsia, which is why he's a good officer. . . . what're the pirates up to?"

(Please turn to page 95)

FRONTIERSMEN WHO MADE HISTORY

from the notebook of CEDRIC·W·WINDAS

PAT CARNEY

Patrick Carney was born in Richmond, Virginia, in 1859. After the Civil War, his parents trekked to Arizona, taking Pat with them. Here he grew up in a hard school of cattle ranching and Colt's law. At 21 he was a topHand and a terror to law breakers.

He chased Hank Dorgan and his rustler gang away from the environs of Holbrook; trailed them clear to Monument Valley. Here Pat and his cowhands corralled, the renegades for keeps in a blistering battle that lasted for two days and spelled the end of the trail for Hank and his henchmen.

In 1884, the notorious gunhawk Ed Pettingel gave Pat twenty-four hours to "get out of Holbrook...and stay out." But Pat stood pat, and riding into town the following morning, fought a duel in the sun with Ed that ended with Pettingel's name being roughly carved on a cross in Boot Hill.

In 1890, Pat's father was wounded from ambush. Pat pursued the bushwhacker, a vengeful gambler from whom the elder Carney had won considerable coin. Pat beat the attacker into submission, turned him over to Holbrook's famous Sheriff Commodore Owens. Pat finally settled in San Diego, where he died in 1911.

• BOSS OF THE

Smashing Western Novelette

CHAPTER ONE

A Man to Kill

IT had been a gray, damp day and now with the sun an hour gone there was a depression about the town that squatted like a tired vulture at the end of the long cattle trail. The light shafts from the windows reached only half way across the streets; the false-fronted buildings were shrouded by the murky night. Kent Tyson, trailboss, tied his horse in front of the saloon and the mood of the night plucked at his memory and rubbed his nerves raw. He stood there undecided.

Everything about the place reminded him too vividly of a night like this six years back, when, as a sixteen-year-old son of a rustler clan, he had left a father and two brothers swinging from the limb of a cottonwood in a town in south Texas. A handsome man with a knife scar on his cheek had been there that night, too, and the scar-faced man had been pleased with the night's work for he had pulled a doublecross that had taken the lives of three of the men who could convict him of his own part in the rustling raids. It

Malicord's skinny little body twisted crazily in the saddle

After six long years Kent Tyson finally caught his father's killer with a rope—but its grim noose was knotted around Tyson's own reckless neck!

BOOTHILL HERD

By THOMAS THOMPSON

had probably been of small concern to Duke Blain that night, Kent often thought, that the youngest of the Tysons had made his escape.

There had been a lot of water over the dam since that night, but it was water that hadn't washed out the memory. It was strong on Kent Tyson now, for he was older and he no longer ran from shadows. Six years older, by actual count; a lot more than that by experience. Along with the gloom of the night there was the talk he had heard on the trail. Duke Blain was doing well, they said. They said the scar on his face was not so noticeable any more. He was handsome enough for any woman. Kent Tyson breathed in the damp air of the night and he knew that it was only the job he had that was holding him here. These days a man couldn't afford to quit a job, not even to take care of the past.

He walked into the saloon and heard the same conversation that had been going on

for a month. He was tired of it. This was election year, this year of 1876, the third year of the panic. It was a violent and confused time. Kent had tried not to remember it and he had tried to keep out of the controversy over what should be done with the disputed votes. "If they give 'em to Hayes there'll be hell to pay," one man said. "It could start another war." So what? Kent Tyson thought. What difference does it make?

Near midnight the news came in from the railroad telegraph station. At first men took it in stony silence, and then they exploded into wild arguments. "They gave the votes to Hayes," a trail man bellowed, thrusting his face close to Kent's. "You hear that? The dirty damn Republicans are back in again and they'll give the country to the railroads! What do you think of that, Tyson? Just tell me what you think!"

"Get your dirty face away from me," Kent Tyson said. "I don't like the smell of your breath." The man moved away, his eyes suddenly wide, and there was a vacant place around Kent at the bar. He liked it that way.

A well known buyer came into the saloon. He glanced around and had no trouble finding Kent's tall, angular frame alone there at the bar. The man came directly to Kent's side, like a man who has business on his mind. He stated that business directly. "The deal's off, Kent," he said. "I won't be making the drive." He got no answer and he forced an explanation where none was needed. "There's just not enough in it for me. I hate to disappoint you like this but things have gone to hell, Tyson. You know that. The cost of living the way it is and now that the election has taken the turn it has—"

"Election, hell," Kent Tyson said. "You were doing me no favor. I've always made my own way and I always will. I'm the best damn trailboss between here and Fort Worth and you know it. If you're not trailing, somebody else is." He paid for his drink and went outside and a dozen men watched his back.

He talked to six cattle buyers that night and the answer was always the same. "This damn election, Kent. People are scared and there ain't any money around." He should have been discouraged, but he wasn't. Somehow it seemed that he was suddenly free to do the things that needed doing.

TRAILDRIVERS were a dime a dozen in Kansas and most of them had started drifting back to their old spots on Texas ranches. But for Kent Tyson there was no point of return. Duke Blain had seen to that. Things would loosen up again, he knew, but a man had to eat in the meantime. He kept thinking of Texas and of how there was work there. Maybe Texas was a big enough place that a man could settle a score and still keep his past buried. He walked in the night, thinking, remembering. A dark, moody man. . . .

In the six years since he had last seen Duke Blain Kent had filled out in flesh and he was tall in the saddle. Given to quick flares of temper and quicker decisions, he was considered a man to leave alone. He had never returned to the Gulf country because there people would remember. But Fort Worth had been safe enough and there he was known as a man who could handle cows and men and he knew the trail north as well as any man. He had a quick way with women, taking what he wanted without asking. Girls who had known him up north said he was handsome. He had no friends and he wanted none; he never said where he came from and no one asked; he kept to himself and he had his private hates. Tonight, one of those hates was getting too big to ignore.

He thought of these things as he walked through the town and he saw that there was nothing here for him. There would never be anything anywhere as long as he left a job undone. He asked a few questions without seeming to ask them and then he packed his gear and by mornings he was heading south.

He crossed the Red one day and came to Texas and the old feeling of wanting to belong somewhere was strong on him. Alone by his fire he allowed himself such thoughts, but in the glare of daylight he was able to keep them down. He had made good money as a trailboss; he had kept none of it. Now, at twenty-two, he sometimes thought of himself as growing old and he wondered how it would be to find some land and settle down. He sad-

dled early and rode south on the plains.

The talk in Texas was of westward expansion. The land was gone in the brush and along the Gulf and there was grass to be had in the country that had once been too thick with Indians. "There's some big outfits moving in on the bend of the Rio Grande," a man said in a saloon one night. "They tell me Duke Blain who used to be down Beaumont way is going out there and you can bet a plugged peso if Blain's going there there's money to be made." Kent Tyson heard and he wondered if the buzzing in his head was from whiskey. He thought of Duke Blain, a success, and he thought of himself, out of a job. A man could keep thinking like that and it could warp him unless he did something about it. He asked a lot of questions and the next day he rode south and west, into the land of distances and jagged peaks and brutally cut canyons. He had promised himself that some day he would see Blain again. This seemed like a good time.

There was a store of sorts at a place where four trails crossed. There was a pole corral with cross poles laced to the posts with buckskin. There was white dust a foot deep and a keg of whiskey on the end of the counter. The man who owned the store was round and soft and dirty and there was a running sore on the back of his hand. He filled a tin cup and said, "Heath is my name. Stranger here, ain't you?"

"You ought to know," Kent Tyson said, tipping his cup. "Here's to your health."

"If you're running I got ammunition that will fit your gun," the storekeeper said. "If you're stayin' you can sleep here for two bits."

"I'll take the ammunition and I'll sleep a night," Kent said. "I'll buy you a drink, too."

"You sound like a man who'll get along here," the storekeeper said. "I got a special jug here for my friends." He brought it out from under the counter.

That night Kent slept rolled in his blankets on the dirt floor of the store. It was midnight when he heard the horses and the pounding on the door. He reached for his gun and lay there quietly until the storekeeper came with a lamp and slid the wooden bar aside. A thick-set man with a *serape* across his shoulder came in and walked over to the whiskey keg. He drank deeply and spoke in Spanish. He had a bragging, swashbuckling way of talking. Heath, the storekeeper, got a flour sack and began putting in provisions. The Mexican jerked his head toward Kent and Heath said in Spanish, "It is all right. He is just a drifter."

THERE were perhaps a dozen more riders outside but they did not dismount. Kent could hear the horses chaffing at chained bits and when the Mexican had his provisions he tossed the sack across his shoulder. As he turned the light was full on his face and Kent could see the beady black eyes, the scarred and pock marked face, the cruelly twisted mouth. The Mexican said in Spanish, "I think I had better kill him anyway." Kent's hand lifted from under the blanket. The hand held a cocked six-shooter.

The Mexican's eyes widened and then there was a smile on his face. He turned to the storekeeper for an explanation and Heath said in English, "He wants to know what the idea is."

"I know what he wants," Kent said. "I speak his lingo as well as he does. He ought to think of that before he starts spouting off about how many cows he's driven across the river." In Spanish he said, "What you do is none of my business, senior, but my life is my affair. You are not going to kill me, now or ever. It is no concern of mine that you were here. Let us keep it that way."

"A game rooster," the Mexican said. "See that the mouth is kept shut or you may find yourself without a tongue." He turned quickly and went outside and they heard him ride away with his crew.

The storekeeper put down the lamp and fished a broken cigar from a shelf in back of the counter. He looked at Kent with moist eyes and said, "Sorry. If Zuniga wanted to kill you it was good business to let him. He's a damned good customer of mine. You ain't."

"That's all right," Kent said. "I'd a done the same." He helped himself to a drink and said, "Is there work for a man around here?"

The storekeeper smoked thoughtfully.

"I reckon Zuniga there would be the best pay," he said, "if a man had a flare for that kind of work and Zuniga took a liking to him. He likes a man that stands up for his self like you just did."

"And if not Zuniga?"

"The biggest spread is Duke Blain's." The storekeeper peered through his smoke cloud. "Blain keeps growing and he likes a man whose gun hangs right."

"Who else is there?" Kent said.

"Half a dozen small outfits scattered from hell to breakfast and none of 'em worth powder and shot to blow 'em to hell. Seems they have trouble hanging onto their cows. They're all about under except an old boy by the name of Sid Malicord. Runs open range next to Blain. He's whipped too but he don't know it. Tough as a boot and onery as a scorpion. Killed his wife off with sheer cussedness, folks say. He's all stove up but he keeps hangin' on. He's got a gal and it 'pears to me Duke Blain has got an eye on her."

"How come Duke Blain keeps growing while the rest go broke?" Kent asked.

Heath swished his whiskey in his cup. "I never felt that was none of my business," he said.

But it could be my business, Kent thought. Aloud he said, "Reckon this Malicord could use a hand?"

"I reckon he could," the storekeeper said. "Workin' for him and gettin' paid might be two different colored horses though. Have another drink?"

"Yeah, reckon I will," Kent said.

They drank and the storekeeper said, "I'll give you a credit here at the store if you go to work. Don't make much difference where because sooner or later you'll wind up workin' for Blain and his credit's good."

"Thanks," Kent said. "I can do with some sleep."

But he didn't sleep. He stared at the smoke blackened ceiling and the packed earth was hard under his back. He thought of a Mexican rustler named Zuniga and he thought of the many tricks the Tysons had learned in the old days. Maybe he could be useful to Zuniga. Then he thought of Duke Blain and of how this set-up here was like an old pattern. Duke Blain had always done well. He wondered what Blain would be like if something went wrong. He figured he'd find out.

CHAPTER TWO

Mexican Ally

THERE was a pole gate but no fence and that marked the boundary of Sid Malicord's Walking M. Somehow, there in the nothingness, it was impressive and Kent Tyson got down and opened the gate to ride through when he could better have ridden around it. He had mounted again and was riding up the rutted road when a horse and rider came out from behind a clutter of house high rocks and blocked his way. The man on the horse said, "I see you got respect for a man's property line."

"I have," Kent said, "as long as it doesn't press on my own."

The man on the horse was old with trouble, a gnarled man with a hatchet face and a twisted arm. He wore no belt and his trousers were pinned at the front with a square nail. His shirt was open to his waist and there was a cap and ball Colt thrust between his pants and his dirty underwear. He said, "If you had ridden around that gate I would have shot you."

"I didn't," Kent said. "I'm looking for a job. The man at the store said you might have one. I take it you're Sid Malicord?"

"You take it right," Sid Malicord said, "but you come with a damn poor recommendation."

"I don't need a recommendation," Kent said. "I'm a top hand."

"You're sure of yourself, ain't you?"

"I am," Kent said.

"Then you're hired," Sid Malicord said. "You'll get paid when I sell some cows. Until then you'll eat and have a place to sleep and you'll have bullets for that gun of yours when I find out where to use 'em best."

"Rustlers?" Kent asked.

"Maybe," Sid Malicord said. He didn't enlarge on it. Kent Tyson didn't care. He didn't care about the job nor about Sid Malicord. He had had a lot of time to think about Duke Blain and he wanted to be near enough to have a look at the man again. After that he could decide how to handle it.

They rode up to the house, the twisted old man and his new hand, and it was a dismal place in a land of much nothingness. The house was built of mismatched boards with a brush roof and it stood against a granite cliff that changed colors as the day wore on.

A girl came out to meet them and she stood a long time, looking at Kent Tyson. She was tall and dark and her eyes were wide, her lips full and red. She had a complete frankness about her that made itself felt and that frankness said that she liked Tyson's looks. He let his eyes caress her body, the swell of her breasts under the faded man's shirt, the curve of her hips. She seemed pleased with his attention. Malicord said, "My daughter Theo. Theo, I hired us a man. This here is Kent Tyson."

She said, "It gets lonesome here. It will be good having someone else around."

She fixed a meal and said little but after they had eaten and her father had gone outside she turned suddenly and said to Kent, "Tell me about where you've been, what you've seen." There was hunger in her voice. "What clothes do they wear? Have you seen a play? I mean in a theater?"

She was standing close to him and he was aware of her nearness. There was an eagerness in her eyes and hungriness a man could feel about her. He thought, this is Duke Blain's girl and I can have her for the asking. He said, "I've seen a lot but I've never seen a girl prettier than you." There was a flush to her dark cheeks but she was pleased by the compliment. He said, "I've been to Kansas, to the railroad. There's a lot to see there. Come here and I'll tell you."

She indicated a bench and he sat by her. She put her hands on his and looked up into his face. There was a childishness about her and yet there was a disturbing maturity. He started to talk, and he was a man not used to talk, but he found a lot to say. He kept seeing her face and the parted lips and the blood was hot in his veins. He thought, I'll start by taking this away from Duke Blain. He put his arm around her and she did not move away. He leaned forward suddenly and kissed her on the lips. She did not try to pull away from him and instead of feeling the hot thrill of conquest he felt a little ashamed. Without meaning to say it he said, "Why did you let me do that?"

She said honestly, "Because only one other man has kissed me. It ain't right that a girl should know only one man."

He felt the blood pounding in his temples. He said, "You're a strange one. You could love a man, couldn't you?"

"I could," she said. "Or I could hate him." Her father came in and she got up quickly and smoothed her dress. Kent felt the old man's eyes on him and he knew there was color in his cheeks.

Sid Malicord said, "Your job is with cows, Tyson. My daughter is young and full of fancy ideas. Stay away from her." He had a way of making things sound final and Kent could see how it was that this man had hung on to his starvation spread. Malicord motioned with his head and Kent followed him outside.

IF Sid Malicord thought anything more about what he had seen he didn't mention it. He put Kent to mending a broken spot in the pole corral and he showed him a dirty shed with a built in bunk where he could spread his blankets. He was a silent man with trouble on his face but he never complained and there was something to like about him.

Time and again Kent felt Theo watching him and he knew that she wanted to talk to him. At first he had thought of pushing his advantage because Heath, the storekeeper, had said that this girl belonged to Duke Blain. But she was too young and it would be too easy. He found himself thinking about her a lot as he rode the wild, unfenced country with old Malicord.

"There's the river," Sid said, pointing down from a mesa where they had ridden. "Across there is Mexico but can you name me a market for cows over there? If it's Zuniga stealing our cows what does he do with 'em?"

Kent Tyson had an idea but he wasn't ready to mention it. Instead he said, "How many head has Duke Blain lost?"

"Duke's a big man," Malicord said, spitting at the ground. "This is a big country and maybe it takes a big man to survive." It was the closest Sid had ever come to admitting defeat. Kent had found

a lot to admire in the old man with the twisted arm.

"I wouldn't sell out to Blain if I was you," Kent said.

Malicord leaned across his saddle-horn and his eyes were full of the smoky distance that lay between the mesa and the border. "I was talking to Duke a couple of days ago," he said. "I told him I'd hired myself a hand and was gonna give it another try. I mentioned you by name."

Kent felt a tightening of his muscles. He rolled himself a cigarette and had trouble with his fingers. As he licked the paper he said, "What did Duke say about it?"

Malicord took his time about answering. "I reckon you know what he said."

Kent Tyson took a deep drag on his cigarette and felt the smoke seep into the recesses of his lungs. "You want me to ride?"

"Did I say that?" Malicord wanted to know.

"Duke Blain wouldn't have much good to say about me."

"I ain't one to scrape around in a man's past," Malicord said. He pointed down a canyon. "That twenty-five head I was telling you about would be down there in that draw yonder. Can you handle 'em alone?"

"Yeah, I can handle 'em," Kent Tyson said. He threw down his cigarette. "Thanks, Sid."

He rode down the side of the canyon and he knew now that he was going to stay with the Walking M. He told himself it was because by staying he could upset Duke's plan of buying it out cheap. But that wasn't all of it, either, because if Duke and Theo were married Duke would eventually take over the ranch anyway. He thought of Malicord and he thought of how this was a place where a man was judged for what he was and not for what he had been.

He found the twenty-five head in the narrow canyon where a spring fed a small stream. They were two-year-olds and they had been driven before and were not as wild as the older stock. He got them into a loose bunch without too much trouble and started them moving slowly down the draw. Malicord wanted them on that grass he had up back of the house.

A heavy-set steer made a quick break and Kent's horse snapped out after him. Kent ducked as they met a wall of brush head on. When they were through he raised his head and saw the four riders. They had guns and they were trained on Kent's middle. One man said, "Never mind the steer, Tyson. My boys will get him. Get on back peaceful like. We're gonna help you drive some cows."

THE first numbing shock passed quickly and he tried to swing his horse so that his gun hand would be free. A rawhide reata snaked out like the lash of a whip and settled around his shoulders, pinning his arms to his side. The man who had spoken first said, "Take it easy, Tyson. We want you alive for a while."

A tall, stringy puncher rode close and removed the rope. He lifted Kent's gun. Another man, an albino with a hare lip, turned his horse and rode after the steer that was headed back up the draw. The leader of the gang rolled a cigarette and said, "Go on and get those cows movin', boys. I'll take care of Tyson." He rode close and shoved his six shooter against Kent's back. "We'll ride drag," he said.

It seemed apparent enough that this was part of Zuniga, the rustler's, gang, and yet it was surprising to Kent to find them all Americans. He had supposed that Zuniga's men would be Mexican. He said, "I'd heard your boss was a big timer. I didn't know he'd risk his neck for a herd this size."

"You don't know lots of things, Tyson," the rustler said. "Now it's too late to find out."

The hare lip brought the wayward steer back into the herd and the four rustlers rode easily in their saddles, joking back and forth, ignoring Kent except to keep a gun constantly covering him. Kent felt that his insides had turned to jelly and the perspiration was thick on his face. He picked up their names, anything to keep his mind occupied. Noonan—Dyke. Dyke was the one with the hare lip. Henkin was tall to the point of being deformed. He was the one who had lifted Kent's gun. The leader was Tex Miller. None of the names meant anything. Kent remembered the night there in Heath's store and he said, "Zuniga wants to see me, does he?"

"I wouldn't know," Tex Miller said. "When we get far enough back in the canyons so nobody will find your carcass you won't have to worry about it."

They didn't speak to him after that and they drove the cattle out of the canyon and into a wide valley that swept down between the barren hills toward the Rio Grande. The cattle started to spread and the men were busy, Tex Miller holding back to keep a gun on Kent. It was then they saw the rider coming down the valley toward them. It was Sid Malicord.

Tex Miller started to curse. The other men were too busy with the cattle to notice. Old Sid reined up sharp, the worry lines deep on his face. "Tex!" he called. "What the hell you and the boys doing here? How come you're taking my stock this way?"

Kent Tyson didn't see the answer coming. He only heard it. The gun in Miller's hand crashed and Malicord's skinny little body twisted crazily in the saddle. There was an explosion of action inside Kent, just as there had been that night when his dad and brother had died. He sunk his spurs shank deep in his horse's side and sawed viciously on the reins. The sorrel reared and turned and Kent's fist caught Miller on the side of the head. The blow knocked the rustler out of the saddle.

Kent threw himself from his horse and scooped up Miller's six-shooter. He cocked it and turned and saw that he would never have a chance. The other riders were coming at him from three directions. He took only time to make sure that Malicord was past any help and then he threw himself into his saddle and rode in one stirrup, Indian fashion.

A half dozen bullets tagged after him, none of them close, and then he was back into the canyon and there were a dozen twists and turns to hide him. He cut off into a little arroyo where the water had left peaks of earth like inverted icicles and here he dismounted and let his horse rest while he checked the gun. It was a .44, like his own, and the tall man called Henkin had not bothered to remove Kent's belt and holster. He reloaded the weapon and waited. After a while he could hear the bawl of cattle and he knew that the rustlers were moving the herd. He started adding two and two together and got nothing. He waited until it was dark and then went cautiously out to pick up Malicord's body. He came to the place where the shooting had occurred and there was nothing there. He could see where Sid's body had been—the blood was still on the grass—but the body was gone. He made a cigarette and smoked thoughtfully in the darkness and then he mounted and rode north and west, in the direction of Heath's store.

FROM what he had seen that night at the store and from the few things Malicord had said Kent knew that Heath was an ally of Zuniga. Heath would probably volunteer little information but there were always ways to make a man talk. He rode cautiously when he came near the store and then satisfied that no one was there he came boldly out of the mesquite choked swales and up on the ridge. A dozen rifles cut loose and lead whined dangerously close to his head. He jerked his horse around and had time to see the dozen riders who had been in hiding close by. He heard their yells and knew they were after him. One of those riders was Theo Malicord. Another was Duke Blain.

There was no time to argue or explain. He jabbed his spurs until they drew blood and headed back into the protection of the rolling, brush-choked country. A bullet seared his ribs and knocked him sidewise in the saddle. He drew his gun and fired back and the shot scattered the riders. He saw a twisted, rocky canyon and headed that way. It was not until he had ridden a half mile or more that he realized he was trapped. The canyon ended abruptly against a sandstone cliff.

The riders didn't follow him in. He could hear them back there at the mouth of the canyon, milling around as if they were waiting. He dismounted and scouted the solid rock trap and he soon saw why they were in no hurry. There was no water here. There was no grass. There was nothing but flat sandstone and sun baked rocks. The glare of the morning sun was suddenly hot on his back and his mouth was unaccountably dry. He loosened the cinch of his saddle and the horse stood hip-shot with dropping head. He reloaded his gun and tried to think.

He waited out the entire day and they

didn't come after him. His tongue was getting thick and his lips blistered. It was like Duke Blain to let him wait this way. The sun grew tired and dropped behind the hills and a purple shadow fell over the rock canyon. The heat in the rocks remained and became suffocating in its intensity. The horse was pitifully thirsty and Kent removed the saddle, headed the beast toward the mouth of the canyon and struck it with the bridle reins. It disappeared around the rocks, going at a wobble legged trot. He heard the sudden shouting of the men, then a silence. He found a pebble and rolled it around in his mouth, moistening his throat with his own scant saliva. As soon as it was dark perhaps they would come for him. The flesh wound across his ribs began to throb.

He forced his thinking into a pattern of deduction, starting with the identity of his pursuers. It had happened too fast for him to recognize anyone except Blain and Theo, but if they were there then the others must be Blain's riders and perhaps men from some of the other hardscrabble spreads in the valley. If they were after him it must be because they considered him responsible for the death of Malicord. They had found Sid's body—that was why it wasn't there when Kent had ridden back late last night. But why be so quick to accuse him? The wound on his side gave a sharp jab of pain and Kent's lips curled back from his teeth. Duke Blain again. Only Blain knew enough of his past to make an accusation like this logical. Blain was a man who wouldn't let the past die. The past can be a deadly thing if you stir it enough, Duke Blain.

His throat was parched now and the slight wound in his side kept up a continual throbbing until his thinking took on a rhythm that kept pounding in his head. He was trapped, like a rat in a hole, and he had done nothing. He refused to die this way. He started moving around the wall of the box canyon, looking for a means of escape. He found it where the sheer cliff cornered sharply into the side of the canyon. There were clumps of vegetation here growing in dirt pockets up the side of the wall. It was a nearly impossible climb but it could be done if a man had the heart for it. He grasped the first shrub and pulled himself up six or eight feet to a small shelf. He stayed there a long time, panting, looking back down at the short distance he had climbed, looking up the hundred foot wall to where he could see the stars peering over the lip of the gorge.

By midnight he was half way up the wall. The blood was pounding in his temples and his mouth was full of cotton. His hands were torn and bleeding and his clothes were ripped in a dozen places. He kept thinking of the night his father and two brothers had died and everything seemed to resolve itself into the face of Blain. Blain with his success and his smooth talk and his doublecross. He had been as guilty as the Tysons, for without him they would have had no market for their stolen beef. But the mob lust had turned against the rustlers, not against the buyer. Duke Blain had seen to that. He stood on tip-toe and clutched a gnarled sage above him. It took him a half hour to make the next ten feet.

The gun on his hip became a dead weight and he considered getting rid of it but the picture of Blain was too strong. Someday, someplace, he would meet the man and when he did he would need a gun. He kept climbing and he did not know when he reached the top. He only knew that he was lying there and the early morning air was cold against his face. He got to his hands and knees and he saw the man sitting there, not ten feet away. The man had a rifle resting across his knees.

HIS first impulse was to draw his gun and fire, but a cruel, animal like cunning had taken hold of him. He had been a trapped animal and now he was thinking like a trapped animal. He started crawling on hands and knees, his gun in his hand. He took his time and he could hear the even breathing. The man was a guard put here to watch this one remote avenue of escape. The guard was asleep.

The guard's head was tilted forward on his chest, his hat brim hiding his face. His head rose and fell slightly with his measured breathing. Kent crawled closer and then he raised himself to his knees like a rearing bear. His hand rose and then snapped down and the heavy gun barrel smashed the hat and was a muted

sound against the guard's skull. The guard slumped over on his side and his face was exposed. It was Tex Miller, the man who had killed Sid Malicord. Kent fought off a desire to finish the job. He took the rifle and Miller's six-shooter and crawled off into the gray dawn, just as he had crawled that other morning a long time ago.

He found Miller's horse a little ways back from the rim of the canyon. He mounted and felt better for having a horse under him. He rode slowly, skirting down the rim of the canyon, a gun in his hand. He would kill now—kill the first thing that moved. They had forced him into it.

But he didn't kill, because the first human being he saw was Theo Malicord. She was sitting up with a blanket wrapped around her, there near the mouth of the canyon. Near her, rolled in blankets, he saw the forms of the men who had hunted him. He studied them a long time and he thought he could make out the shape of Duke Blain. His eyes went back to Theo Malicord and while he was watching her she turned and faced him. It was too dark for her to see him, he was sure, but he felt her soft eyes and for a fleeting moment he remembered her lips. He faded back into the brush and mounted the horse and in a little while he had his bearings and knew the direction of Heath's store. He rode that way and when he was far enough away from the canyon he spurred the horse into a trot.

He hit one of the trails a mile north of Heath's store and his horse's hoofs were silent in the feathery dust. This time he circled the store twice before riding in and when he did go in he approached from the back and studied the building a while before dismounting. He looped the reins of the bridle over the top pole of the corral and went around to the front of the store on foot. He rapped on the front door with the barrel of the gun.

His breathing was heavy as he waited for some movement inside. In time it came—first a sliver of yellow light against the dirty window, then the sound of the wooden bolt sliding. The door opened a crack and Heath's voice said, "Zuniga?"

Kent slid the barrel of his six shooter through the narrow opening. "Not Zuniga," he said. "Open up."

THE door opened a bit and Kent shouldered inside. He brought the barrel of his gun up and it pressed into the paunchy belly of the storekeeper. There was enough light from the lantern to deepen the seams of his face and glint against the gun barrel. It made black splotches of the blood on his hands. Heath said, "You're a damn fool."

"A matter of opinion," Kent said. "I want some information."

The storekeeper ran a pink tongue across his soft lips. "I sell supplies," he said. "Not information. From a killer I ask cash in advance and I set my own price."

"You'll sell me information," Kent said, "and on credit." His thumb hooked back the hammer of the six-shooter and the click was loud in the room. Heath twitched his thick shoulders and it was hard to tell whether it was from fear or just against the morning cold. "Start talking," Kent said. "What are they saying?"

"That you killed Malicord," Heath said. "You made a poor choice. If you had to kill a man there were others who would have been missed less."

"Like yourself?"

"Perhaps," Heath said. "Duke Blain will stick up for Malicord because he is going to marry the old man's daughter. The other cockleburr outfits around here liked him because he had guts. The only thing I had against him was that he wasn't a good enough customer. What the hell did you have to gain, Tyson?"

"Suppose I said I didn't kill him?"

"It would be logical enough for you to say," Heath said. "It wouldn't mean much when four men saw you. Dyke may have a hare lip but his eyes are good. Tex Miller doesn't make that kind of mistake. Noonan and Henkin are careful what they say. Duke Blain likes that kind of crew."

"Those four work for Duke Blain?"

"If it makes any difference, yes," Heath said. "Any more information you need?"

"I'll have some water," Kent said. "Then tell me where I can find your friend Zuniga."

"I'll tell you where to find the water," Heath said. "As for Zuniga—you don't find him. He finds you."

"Thanks," Kent said. "You tell him I'll be around close. You tell Duke Blain

that too. They'll both need to know it."

"For a price I'll tell nothing," Heath said.

"Just show me the water," Kent said. He let the hammer down on the gun and dropped it into his holster. He saw Heath's fat hand move and he added, "Don't get any ideas." Heath shrugged and led the way through a side door. There was a pump there. It stood on a four foot high pipe and there was a barrel.

For the next ten minutes he soaked his head and face and his chest with water, working with one hand, pausing now and then to shift the gun from one hand to the other. He fought to keep from drinking too much and in time it seemed that his body was saturated. After that he followed Heath back inside the store and helped himself to a tin cup full of whisky. "You can charge that to Malicord," he said then. "I'm still working for the Walking M. Tex Miller killed Sid and I saw him do it. When you see Duke Blain tell him I said it's getting to be a short trail." He backed through the side door and ran around the corner of the house to where he had left his horse. It was still gray dark. He unlooped the reins and put a foot in the left stirrup. He heard the click of the rifle before he saw the girl.

She was standing against one of the thick posts, nearly hidden by the shadow. She glided out into the open now, the rifle raised toward Kent's chest. She said simply, "I saw you back there. I followed you. Do you want to say anything before I kill you?"

IN THOSE few seconds he remembered a lot about a girl. He remembered the strange hunger of loneliness he had seen in her eyes and he remembered how his thoughts had changed when he had kissed her. He remembered telling her that she could love a man and most of all he remembered her answer that she could also hate. There was hatred in her face now. He removed his foot from the stirrup and he saw her finger tighten against the trigger.

There was no time to talk or to reason. He stood there, his muscles slack, and then he turned his body and his open hand slapped against the side of her head. It knocked her off her feet and the rifle exploded harmlessly. He threw himself on her, pinioning her arms against the ground, and her face was close to his. He could feel the straining of her young body against his own, feel the beat of her breath against his face. He said, "Tex Miller killed your dad, you little fool! Give me a chance to talk."

She had an amazing strength and she twisted her head and her teeth cut into his forearm. A quick gasp of pain came from his lips as he jerked his arm free and he slapped her again, hard. She did not cry out. A small, booted foot cracked against his shin. A voice above them said, "You are rough with the ladies too, eh my proud rooster? I hear you wish to see me."

Kent didn't release his grip on the girl. He turned his head and saw Zuniga, the rustler, standing there. The man had a gun in his hand and a brown cigarette dangled from one corner of his mouth. Kent said, "Help me with the girl."

"I do not mix in the affairs of lovers," Zuniga said. "You have a better offer?"

The girl quit her struggling and Kent held her wrists. He could feel the hatred of her condemning him, cutting into him. He said, "Twenty-five cows."

"An interesting offer," the Mexican said. "And for twenty-five cows I hide you so the ranchers cannot find you and stretch your neck?" He laughed. "You do not put such a high price on your life, my rooster." He was thoughtful a moment. "These are the twenty-five cows you stole from Sid Malicord?"

"If you want it that way," Kent said.

Zuniga threw back his head and laughed. "You are a fool, Kent Tyson. If you had come to me perhaps I could have used you as a rider. But by stealing cows on this side of the river you have proven yourself a fool. Where will you sell them?"

Kent had never bothered to consider the point much since Sid Malicord had first mentioned the same question. Now he was anxious to know the answer. He said, "The same place you sell yours. Across the river. Mexico."

Zuniga shook his head from side to side. "If you can find a market for beef in Mexico, my rooster, you are a smart man indeed. In Mexico we have more cows

than people. It is on this side of the river that one sells cows."

An old pattern started forming in Kent Tyson's mind. He remembered a meeting a long time back where a younger Duke Blain had squatted by a fire. "If the price is low enough I won't be particular about brands," he had said. And he remembered asking Heath how it was that Duke Blain had grown in this country while the other ranches kept moving closer to failure— He got up suddenly and released the girl. She flew at him and her fingernails raked across his cheek. He caught her wrists and held her. Pulling her close to him he turned and faced Zuniga. He said, "All right, Zuniga. I'll sell them to Duke Blain. He was a good customer of mine once. He can be again."

Zuniga let the cigarette drop from his lips. "I am a business man, Kent Tyson," he said. "I have killed men who tried to spoil my business."

"You're about to go out of business, Zuniga," Kent said. "Not because of me but because of your best customer. I've seen Duke Blain work this before. I was in on it. When the time came my father and two brothers swung from a limb but nothing happened to Duke Blain. That's the way it will happen to you."

The light was stronger now and Kent could see the strain on the face of Zuniga. The Mexican said, "A rat who is about to be caught in the trap does a lot of squeaking."

"You're a fool," Kent said. "Talk to your friend Heath. Ask him who is accused of rustling stock from these ranches. Have you heard of the Texas Rangers? Do you think this is too far away for them to come?"

"The Texas Rangers do not cross into Mexico," Zuniga said.

"But they'll kill a Mexican who steals cows on this side of the river."

"You talk like a monkey."

"You'll swing like one with a rope on your neck," Kent said.

EXCEPT for holding her motionless he had ignored the girl while talking to Zuniga. She had not tried to escape and she had not uttered a sound. Now she screamed, a high, piercing sound that reached out through the quickening morning and lay in the air like a knife blade. Kent clapped a hand over her mouth and she bit him. He jerked his hand away and she screamed again. And immediately on the heels of it they heard the shouting of men, the unmistakable sound of saddle leather and spurred horses. Kent said, "Stay and ask Duke Blain about it, Zuniga. That's him coming." He picked the girl up and put her into his saddle, then swung up behind her. As he sunk his spurs he looked back and saw that Zuniga was following.

Duke Blain and the ranchers broke out of the morning not two hundred yards behind them. There was a crackle of shots, harmless because of the motion of the horses and the thin light. Kent caught a glimpse of Zuniga's puzzled face and he heard the Mexican shout, "Follow me!"

He did as he was told, riding blindly, trying desperately to keep up, his horse laboring as it was under the double burden of himself and the girl. They came into a flat thick with sage and to Kent it looked like suicide. Zuniga kept working his horse in a zig-zag pattern, skirting closer and closer to a screen of high mesquite that grew along a sheer sandstone cliff. The pursuing ranchers were closing in and they were going to be trapped against the wall. Zuniga reined his horse sharply, straight into a wall of brush. The horse went through and the cliff opened into a narrow cleft. Horse and rider plunged through and Kent followed. Immediately the sounds of pursuit behind them were muted.

They rode a breakneck pace up the narrow rock corridor and came to a sudden valley completely surrounded by rock walls. A dozen Mexicans were there and they scampered for rifles and the gun barrels made a bristling stockade around the two men and the girl. There were signs of a permanent camp here and a spring bubbled from the rock and made a small stream. Zuniga spoke rapidly in Spanish and six of the men levered shells into their guns and ran down the corridor. Zuniga wiped his face with his neckerchief. His forehead was corrugated with puzzled wrinkles. He said, "I do not understand. Duke Blain is my friend."

"He's no man's friend, Zuniga," Kent said. "Those bullets were for you as

well as me. Do you believe that now?"

The girl spoke for the first time. Her voice was throaty, vibrant with hatred. "And why not?" she asked. "You a murderer and him a rustler who has stolen our stock faster than we could raise it."

"But señorita," Zuniga complained, his voice pained. "I have not stolen your stock. I would have sold cattle to your father but my good friend Heath tells me he does not have money to pay."

"Save it, Zuniga," Kent said. "I saw a sign just yesterday offering five hundred dollars for your hide. It was signed by Duke Blain."

"But I am only an honest man trying to make a living," Zuniga said. "I do not understand the ways of you gringos."

"Have you sold any cattle to Blain lately?"

"Two weeks past," Zuniga said. "He told me then he would not need any more for a long time."

"That's right," Kent said. "He won't. He's stolen enough from the rest of the ranchers around here to make up a herd. Unless I miss my guess he was going to trail that herd north. Before he left he was going to get rid of you and then he would be remembered in this country as a great man and they would say he was generous in offering to buy up the other ranches. Sid Malicord refused to sell under any circumstances but Blain had a way around that, too. There was this girl here. She was lonesome and she was afraid she would be an old maid. It was easy for her to say yes to the only proposal of marriage she ever had in her life." He ducked as Theo tried to slap his face.

Zuniga said, "I think I have been double cross."

"I think so," Kent Tyson said. "It's a habit Blain has."

Zuniga pursed his lips and thought a long time. "I think I will cut a throat," he said.

"Not Duke Blain's," Kent Tyson said. "That job is mine. Is there another way out of this canyon?"

"There is no other way," Zuniga said sadly. "There has never needed to be another way. Until today no one but myself and my men knew it was here."

"Then we're going out the way we came in," Kent said.

"It will be a good fight," Zuniga said.

Kent Tyson shook his head. "The girl will be in the saddle in front of me. If they start anything they'll hit her. I don't think even Duke Blain would risk that."

He saw the white mask of fear on Theo Malicord's face, but under that he saw the loathing she felt for him. It hurt him more than anything had ever hurt him before. He said softly, "Trust me, Theo. I'll show you the man who killed your father. I'll show you what I've been saying is right."

She spoke through clenched teeth. "I hate you, Kent Tyson. I'll kill you if it's the last thing I ever do."

Zuniga laughed a musical laugh. "I think she loves you, Kent Tyson."

CHAPTER THREE

The Last Blue Chip

RIFLE fire broke out up at the end of the corridor. Zuniga heard it and sighed. "They are good men, those men of mine," he said. "I have wine in a jug and a stack of tortillas. There is no need for us to become involved in this. My men will handle it well."

Kent Tyson's six-shooter slipped from its holster. His thumb hooked back the hammer and he leveled the gun toward Zuniga. "You're playing this my way, Zuniga."

The Mexican rustler looked at the gun and a smile curled one corner of his lips. "This is the second time you have pointed a gun at me, Kent Tyson," he said. "I do not like it."

"I was ready to pull the trigger the first time," Kent said. "I'm ready now." He reined his horse close and lifted the two six-shooters Zuniga had thrust in his belt. "Follow me and do as I say."

Zuniga's voice had a whispering quality. "You have spoken of a double cross," he said. "Perhaps you know much about such a game?"

"I'm not after you, Zuniga," Kent said. "You have my promise."

"It is probably as worthless as mine," Zuniga said. "But you have a gun and I have none." He shrugged his shoulders.

"We'll ride down the pass here. You call in your men and tell them to do as I

say. We'll all get along good, then."

They started down the rock corridor, Kent in the lead, the girl in the saddle in front of him. He kept himself half turned so that he could swing the gun toward Zuniga if necessary. Zuniga followed along submissively and when they were half way through the pass the rustler called out in Spanish. The sporadic firing ceased and a dozen peaked sombreros appeared from behind the jumble of rocks on either side of the pass. Zuniga looked at Kent for instructions.

"I'll ride through first," Kent said. "They won't shoot as long as I have the girl with me. While I'm talking to them you and your men surround them. Take their guns."

They came to the mouth of the pass, still screened by the brush. Kent stood in his stirrups and called out. "Can you hear me, Duke Blain? It's Kent Tyson!"

There was a long silence, then a voice, heavier than he had remembered it. "I hear you, Tyson. Come on out or we're coming in after you. I see you're still running with the same breed of polecat."

"Polecat?" Zuniga said, cocking his head. "This is me, this polecat?"

"That's you," Kent said. He put one hand over Theo's mouth and pulled her head back against his chest. "Listen to me, Duke. I've got the girl."

There was a long silence and then a voice Kent didn't recognize called, "Come on out, Tyson. We'll hold our fire."

THEY rode slowly through the brush screen and saw the dozen riders grouped in a ring. Kent swept the group with his eyes. Of the twelve he recognized Duke Blain, Tex Miller, Noonan and Henkin. The others were strangers to him. They were hard-bitten men, their clothes work stained and patched, their faces lean with trouble. They would be the other small ranchers.

Blain was heavier than he had been six years back. He had the mark of success about him but there was a sharp cunning on his handsome face. He kept moistening his lips nervously and he seemed to be trying to signal his four men with his eyes. Kent said, "I wouldn't try it, Blain." Zuniga's riders came out of the pass, rifles leveled. Zuniga spoke in Spanish and two of the rustlers rode forward and disarmed the ranchers. One man cursed bitterly.

A sneer curled the lips of Duke Blain. "You expect to get away with this, Tyson?"

"I do," Kent said. "I've waited a long time and I've had a lot of time to think. You've made a slip, Duke. You've got a fat middle buying stolen cows and breaking your neighbors. You made it work once back there in Beaumont but it won't work here. I want you to show these other men here where you've been hiding the cows you've been stealing from them."

"The cows you tell them I steal, you double cross," Zuniga said.

"Why you thieving cholo!" Blain exploded.

"You were such a good customer for the wet cows I bring from Mexico," Zuniga said. "Then you go into business against me. I do not like this."

One of the ranchers, an old, weathered man with a white goatee said, "What the hell they talking about, Blain?"

"How should I know?" Blain said nervously. Then, blustering: "Theo, have they harmed you?"

The girl's voice was surprisingly strong. "No, but I have a feeling they've harmed you. They say Tex Miller killed my dad. How about it, Duke Blain?"

"Damn it," Tex Miller yelled. "You ain't gonna get me mixed up in this!"

"Start riding, all of you," Kent ordered. "Get back to where you and your boys held me up and took those Walking M cows away from me, Miller. Back to the spot where you killed Sid!"

It was past noon when they came to the place where Sid Malicord had been killed. Time and again Kent had tried to talk to the small ranchers but they stared stonily ahead, men who had seen too much trouble, men who were not given to talk. Tex Miller and Duke Blain remained arrogant and when they had arrived at the death spot Miller leaned across his saddle, a leer on his face. "All right, bright boy," he said. "Where are we supposed to go now?"

"Just follow those tracks," Kent said, nodding toward the trail left by the twenty-five Walking M cows.

"Sure," Tex Miller said. "Glad to." There was too much willingness in his

voice. An hour later Kent knew why. The trail ended on a broad, sandstone flat. There was no way to follow it further. Kent felt his first real misgiving. Unless he could locate the missing herd he could prove nothing. He was just a drifter with a cloudy past and a personal grudge. If things were left to Zuniga and his men there would be a lot of needless killing here. He looked at Zuniga and saw the smile on the Mexican rustler's face.

"No trouble, Zuniga," Kent said tightly. "No trouble or so help me—"

"So this is where he hides the cows," Zuniga said. "Canyon Del Muerto. Smart hombre, Duke Blain. Nobody would think to look here. Nobody except a very smart man who has used this canyon himself! *Andale, hombres. Alli!*" He pointed and his men herded the ranchers across the mile wide sheet of sandstone.

DUKE BLAIN began to sweat. Tex Miller's face had gone a dead white. He kept licking his lips as if he were horribly thirsty. Duke, the albino with the hare lip, broke suddenly.

"I had nothing to do with it, I tell you!" Duke screamed. He sunk his spurs and leaned far over his saddle-horn. He started lashing the horse across the neck with his reins. He broke out of the circle of men and was fifty yards away before one of Zuniga's men raised his rifle and shot. The albino went over the horse's head and rolled end over end across the sandstone flat. Theo turned her head and hid her face against Kent Tyson's chest.

Blain was losing his nerve. He turned to the small ranchers, perspiration streaking his face. "Look men," he said. "Suppose there are a few strays up there? Hell, what was to keep them from going there? That doesn't prove anything."

"Let's take a look," the rancher with the goatee said.

One look was enough. Inside the broad, spring-fed flat that was more of a valley than it was a canyon, nearly a thousand head of cattle were crowded into a space that normally would not have supported more than three hundred head. They were gaunt, wild-eyed beasts, but they had had plenty of water and grass enough to keep them going. They would fatten quickly enough once they were put back on normal feed. The man with the goatee said, "There's my Forked Lightning brand."

"There's Bonham's Broken B," another said.

"Your dad's cows are over yonder, Theo," Kent said softly. "He must have had an idea something like this was going on. When he caught Blain's men at it yesterday there was no more doubt and they had to kill him. He went easy, Theo." She started to sob softly.

The small ranchers had all dismounted as if at a signal. One of them was uncoiling a rawhide reata from his saddle. "Give them their guns, Zuniga," Kent said.

"I think you crazy," Zuniga said. "You waste too much time." He ordered his men to return the guns to the ranchers.

"Come on, Theo," Kent said. "You won't want to see this. I saw something like it once. It ain't pretty."

There was a quick scuffle of movement, a curse. The rancher with the goatee stumbled backwards under the impact of Duke Blain who had thrown himself from the saddle. The others rushed in but Blain was on his feet, the captured rifle in his hands. "Now, damn you, Tyson," he said. "I've got a score to settle with you!" The rifle exploded and Theo sagged sideways out of the saddle. Something broke inside Kent Tyson's mind, just as it had broken that night his father and brothers died. He dove out of the saddle and his body crashed against Duke Blain just as the rifle blasted again.

He had his gun out now and he tried to use it as a club against Duke's skull. Duke twisted and forced the muzzle of the rifle into the pit of Kent's stomach. Kent rolled to one side and the muzzle of his own six-shooter was not more than an inch from Duke Blain's forehead when he pulled the trigger. Kent stood there alone, the gun in his hand, a sickness in his stomach. He said, "All right, boys. It's your show."

He went over and took the bridle of his own horse and led it to where Theo was lying. Zuniga and four others were kneeling down by her. Someone had brought a hat full of water. There was a strange emptiness inside Kent Tyson. He had won and he had lost. He kneeled down beside the limp body of the girl. He

knew everyone was watching him but it didn't matter. He lifted her head and kissed her lips. It was a long time before her eyelids fluttered open and when they did he was surprised at the brightness of her eyes. She said weakly, "I fainted, I guess. I'm glad I did."

THEY shook Kent Tyson's hand, one by one, and one man said, "I guess we put too much stock in what Duke Blain had to say about you, son."

Kent Tyson wanted to avoid the subject. "He had a good deal all right," he told them. "We can fatten that beef and drive them north. Hell, things are bound to be opening up soon. We got a new president—course he's a Republican and we're all Democrats here but damned if I can believe the Republicans actually want to ruin the country. Even if they did, this country's too big for 'em! This beef will bring a price in Kansas and I'm just the man who can take them there."

"If we can do it it'll sure put us on our feet," old Squint Bonham said. "We're startin' something here that will make this the best cow country in Texas!"

"We'll do it," Kent said, "but first I got a little business of my own." The men jabbed each other in the ribs and winked knowingly.

He found Zuniga with Theo Malicord. Zuniga seemed sad. "You know, Kent Tyson," he said, "I do not know whether you are my friend or not. You show me that Duke Blain is giving me the double cross but you put me out of business."

"Why don't you go on across the river and start a little ranch of your own?"

Zuniga thought about it a long time. "Could be," he said. "I know where I can steal plenty cows to start with."

"Go someplace else to think about it, will you?" Kent said.

"Eh? Oh, sure," Zuniga said, grinning. "I got to go see my good friend Heath. He not gonna like losing me for a customer." He thought a minute. "I buy a bunch of supplies on credit first, then I tell him what happened."

"Good," Kent said. He watched Zuniga ride out of the canyon with his men, then he turned. "And now, young lady."

Theo Malicord turned her head. "I hardly know you," she said. "I don't

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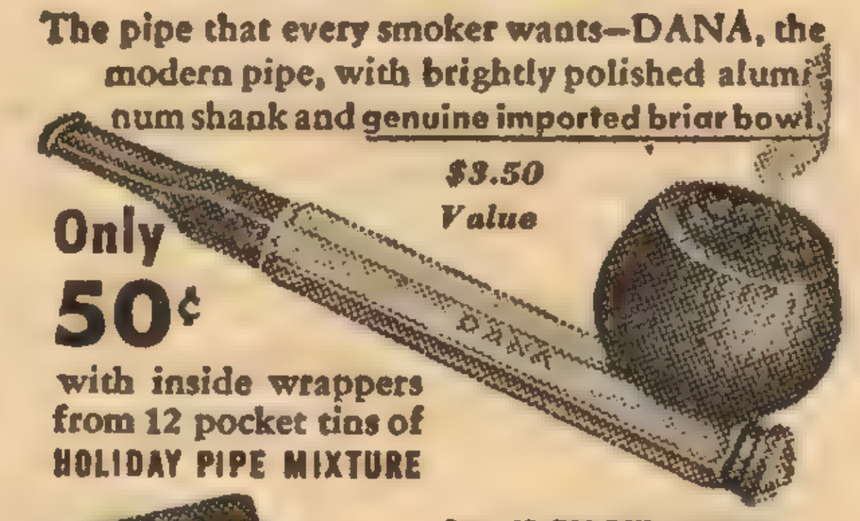

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think that is the proper way for a gentleman to address a lady."

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"You accused me of accepting the first man who proposed to me," she said primly. "I assure you I will not make the same mistake again. The next man who proposes to me will have to court me in a proper manner. And," she added, tilting her head provocatively, "I am not sure I will limit myself to one suitor."

"Hey now," Kent Tyson said. "Wait a minute!"

"You may call on me if you wish," Theo said. "And after you get back from Kansas you may ask for my hand. Provided I haven't accepted someone else meanwhile." She looked across the valley to where the men were leading Duke Blain's crew toward a scattering of cottonwoods. Then she looked back at Kent Tyson and her eyes were full of all the promise a man could ask for. "But I don't believe there'll be much competition," she said.

THE END

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(Continued from page 76)

"Stopped. They think the medicine's back again."

Hillyer nodded grimly. "So it is, Conlin, so it is . . . let's see . . .S-N-A-K-E. . . . C-R-E-E-K. . . . H-E-L-P. . . . suppose the Old Man can read, Conlin? Never saw him with a book. . . . someday, I must do an etching on this plate—the Old Man's large intestine, I guess. . . . S-N-A-K-E . . . C-R- . . . Conlin—we've raised something! Way down there—I saw something—a hand mirror, maybe! What're the pirates doing now? They any closer?"

"Makin' talk. Still no closer." Conlin licked his lips.

"Medicine, Conlin, is all in how you use it. . . . how's your arm?"

"I'd never know it was there." It was at that moment that Conlin turned and, for the first time, saw the inscription on the reverse side of the now motionless plate. It read: David Hibbs Hillyer, Prop., Plains Publishing Co., Yankton. Conlin deduced that modesty was a hobby so far not mentioned.

Some men just naturally don't like to talk to much.

Which is why David Hillyer never told the Old Man, during the ride back to the post, what Conlin had planned for the wide open spaces, and which is why he said, instead: "Major, I'd like Conlin attached to the medical section for awhile. He seems to want to learn. He'll make a good man."

"Take him, take him. He re-enlists next month, and you can have him." The Old Man licked his mustaches. "By the way, Doctor, about my stomach. Is there anything that medical science can do—"

"I've made a hobby of stomachs, major. Guts, if I may say so, and we'll have yours in perfect running order if we have to re-wind it. Now, I have a very good idea."

Conlin, riding behind those two and just forward of the guidon, felt at home for the first time in his life. He felt satisfied.

He'd shaken hands with the devil, and come away clean—with the help of a damn semi-civilian doc.

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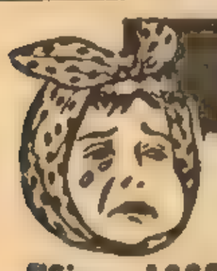

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(Continued from page 6)

below. Horses and cows were frozen to death standing up. And it kept right on throughout February.

Finally the chinook winds came about the middle of March. Before long the streams and rivers were choked with hundreds of carcasses. In coulees and canyons there were sheltered places where cattle had piled in four and five deep and died. An outfit neighboring my granddad had by actual tallybook count branded ten thousand calves during spring and fall roundup of '86. According to the averages of increase that meant they had about forty thousand head of cattle. When they rounded up in the spring of '87 they had less than one hundred yearlings left out of that ten thousand. The best count they ever got on the grown stuff tallied just about seven thousand out of the forty. That was the winter that decided Teddy Roosevelt that politics was a gentle game compared to cow ranching.

Well, that winter of '86-'87 started a lot of the changes that have come to the cow-country since. For a few years, at least, cowmen went to the trouble of building good sheds and windbreaks and of fencing in enough country around them to winter graze up to one thousand and five hundred head and putting them in there where they'd be held close to protection. That bad winter taught them that the only use most of them had made of fencing until then was the worst kind of foolishness. Drift fences had been about the only kind in the range country up to that time. And that bad winter drift fences helped the cold and wind slaughter enough beef to keep New York in beefsteaks for a good long time. My grandfather used to tell it that when the breakup finally came the spring of '87 you could walk from Dodge City to Garden City, and beyond, upwards of one hundred miles, without ever stepping off the carcasses of cattle that had drifted into the fence north of the Santa Fe right-of-way. When cattle hit a fence in such a storm they just stood where it stopped them and froze to death. So cowmen learned that a fence on open range was worse than no fence at all. If you were going to use a fence at all, then it had better be to hold stock close enough to shelter that they won't start drifting.

Another change was that while no one had bothered much about putting up winter hay and feed before, they began work in that direction, beginning to experiment with various kinds of seed: red top, timothy, alfalfa, clover, blue grass, etc. One of our grass fattening ranches used to be down in Barber County, Kansas, in the Gyp Hills, one of the finest cow-countries in the world. I remember as a very small boy hearing one of the old hands tell about the change that "hard winter" brought. He would wag his head and say, "No siree! Cowboys ain't lived soft since the big die-up. I remember before then when we sat around a stove the winter through. Didn't do a lick of work. Usually there was some grub-line rider to even keep our wood chopped for his board. But since the big die-up

cowboying has sure changed. Before, we had two roundups and that was that. Afterwards they began having a general roundup, each outfit getting track of all its stuff that had strayed. After that, calf roundup. And then haying! Before the big die-up what cowboy ever dreamed of ever haying! Then beef roundup after haying. Fall calf roundup after that. Gathering in the bulls and weak stuff after all that. And then just so you didn't let down ner get lazy until riding started again in the spring, you had a winter of shoveling hay. I'll tell a man times changed! No one ever heard the sound of a mowing machine west of the Missouri until after the big die-up!" And that is still the way it is in the Western cow-country: all things date from the big die-up, from "the hard winter."

Well, ranchers began learning how to breed up and feed out better stock, so haying became a fixed part of the cow-country pattern. But after awhile younger men and newcomers began taking over. They had forgotten or had never known personally about "the hard winter." Building systems of windbreaks and big range sheds, paying men to keep them in repair, seemed like a waste of money and time to many. Many even let the shelters they had fall into disrepair. I remember hearing some real arguments between my dad and such other cowmen about that matter. Dad always was a fanatic about keeping his range and the equipment and improvements on it as up to snuff as a society woman wants her house. His cows would calve a month before any one else's, because he always had plenty of shelter handy where they could get to it easy. That was one thing that helped get our stuff to market with a head start that got the best possible prices before everyone else started shipping. They had gotten here sooner as calves and they were ready to make choice beef sooner as steers.

Whenever dad began preaching the benefits of scientific planning of protection and shelter, one of the most frequent arguments was that we just never had the kind of winters anymore that the West had once seen. Dad always answered that with the warning that one of these times a lot of people and livestock were going to get frozen to death because of the idea. That, like rain and drought, bad winters ran in cycles. That one of these winters the winds and snow storms and old fashioned blizzards would lash down across the West from Canada to Mexico again . . . and bring the very same kind of disaster.

This winter certainly has seen him borne out as a prophet. And as I said, it has some parallels with that last hard winter. Last fall Western ranges were again loaded up with too many cattle . . . gamblers, speculators, and regular stockmen, all trying to make their killing while they could. But when time came to sell grass fat and feeder stuff, the market had begun to fall off. So they held a lot of steers that otherwise would have gone to market.

Well, now tons and tons and tons of those steers will never make beefsteak for anyone, anywhere, now. The spring of '87 the coyotes

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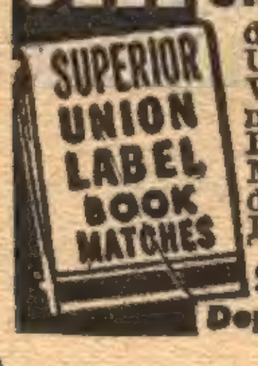

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and buzzards were almost too fat and lazy to be afraid of man. Dad was a boy then and tells of unexpectedly riding up on five big gray timber wolves out in the hills one day. They were so fat and full they just sat and laughed at him like big, good natured dogs. He was scared stiff until he had pushed his old pony hard getting some miles between. Ordinarily in those days even a grown man and a good shot would have an interesting time of it had he somehow surprised that many of those big lobo killers all in a pack. They could pull a horse down like nothing and were just about as terrified of a man as his wife is. But that spring they were living in a land of plenty. If they had no taste for dead meat, there was stock that had managed to survive, but weak and in poor flesh and easily pulled down. There are few real wolves left in the West to fatten themselves, but the coyotes and buzzards will have a rich feast of it again when spring breaks this year. . . .

—*DEL RAYBURN*

Dime Western has always been proud to hail its writers as men who know and love the West, and this letter from Del, we think, proves the point. Incidentally, in the next issue, we figure we have a well-rounded, punch-packed book which brings the colorful figures of the giants of border empires into living, breathing life. Watch for *Dime*—out June 3!

The Editor

(Continued from page 32)

buscaded behind a wheel. He fired two shots so swiftly that the rush of flame and the balls thudding into spokes shook Jess. But he steadied down and got a bead on the gunman.

Donovan pushed himself up as if to rise, stared at Jess a moment and quietly lay forward across his rifle. The rest of the men were shocked out of any semblance of defense. One of them tried to run, and fell. The rest stood congealed with terror.

Jess said, "Hold your fire, boys. I still need a few drivers. They'll drive hogtied and unarmed, and I'll dump them in the first *jusgado* I come to. But if you'd like that better than frying in hell tonight—"

They rolled toward Chihuahua City in the morning, sixteen men and a girl. Some of the men rode with irons on their ankles. They would be replaced by Mexican drivers at El Venado; and that, thought Jess Clyman, might not be a bad idea in this country.

THE END

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